

THE HEARING OF THE WORD

A DISSERTATION

Presented to

the Faculty of the School of Theology at Claremont

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

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June 1976

This dissertation, written by

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Theology at Claremont in partial fulfillment of the
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ABSTRACT

The focus of the dissertation is on hearing as an integral part of preaching. Preaching is examined from the perspective of the hearer. Interdisciplinary in approach, the study draws on the biblical tradition as well as insights from modern communication theory, and attempts to show how these resources inform a concept of preaching. One of the underlying themes of the dissertation is that preaching has a central place in the worship and witness of the church, and the renewal of preaching takes place in the context of the worshipping community.

The meaning of hearing in the biblical tradition is explored. In both the Old and New Testaments there is strong emphasis on the hearing of God's word and responding to it in faithful obedience. The ear is often mentioned in a physical sense, but it derives its deeper significance as a symbol of the whole process of understanding and obedience. In the process of hearing, a person's whole attention and response are involved.

Preaching which breaks through the surface of our lives, enabling us to hear and respond to the gospel, must be rooted in the biblical tradition. The burden of preaching is to present the gospel in such a way that the biblical text is brought into conversation with our lives. The intent of the text is to be proclaimed. The hearer is confronted with the decision of faith. Our self-understanding is

illuminated when we see biblical events not merely as external bits of information, but as the interpretation of our existence.

Using selected models of communication as a basis, the dissertation explores how studies in human communication can enhance the preaching task of the church. Communication is viewed not primarily as the transference of information but as a process by which meanings are exchanged between individuals or groups of persons. The preaching event is a process in which the preacher and the congregation interact with each other. Both the preacher and his listeners bring to the sermon certain skills, attitudes, knowledge and cultural background. A person's past experience, his entire history, his anticipation of the moment and his interaction with whatever is before him--all these factors have something to say about how a message is received.

The final section of the dissertation serves an integrative function and considers preaching and hearing in the context of the corporate life of the church. The ministries of the church are not exclusive prerogatives of the ordained clergy. They are committed to the whole church. The entire congregation is called to participate in the office of proclamation. This thesis is supported by the biblical tradition which views the church as the whole people of God. The emphasis is on the corporate nature of the church. The church is a fellowship in which those who are united with Christ are united with one another.

The biblical understanding of the church requires that preaching be thought of as a communal event. Preaching is an event through which members of the church offer themselves to God and to one another in mutual caring. Understanding preaching as a communal event means that preaching must be seen as an integral part of the worship experience. It is the context of worship which makes preaching something other than a speech given at a civic club. Preaching, as the corporate act of the whole church, strengthens the relationship between pastor and congregation. Through various forms of congregational participation, such as sermon seminars, dialogue preaching and feedback, preaching becomes a cooperative effort involving both pastor and congregation. Effective preaching is characterized by immediacy and invites involvement and participation. The integrity of preaching requires that the congregation become a part of the preaching act.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of Dissertation and Method of Study

The underlying theme of this dissertation is that preaching will experience a resurgence of vitality as it takes seriously the responsibility of the congregation for the sermon--its development, delivery and demands for action. Of the many facets that could be explored, the specific purpose of this dissertation is to examine the function of hearing in the preaching event. Preaching will be considered from the perspective of the hearer. The focus will be on hearing as a crucial factor in the communication of the gospel through the sermon. Hearing will be considered as an integral part of preaching.

Several encouraging movements have been taking place in the field of preaching. Preaching is increasingly understood as a function or a task in the church which can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Phrases or titles such as dialogue preaching and experimental preaching, point to the variety of forms for preaching today. No longer does preaching have to fit the traditional mold of a 20 to 30 minute utterance by the clergy, and subscribe to the usual format of introduction, three points and conclusion with a few poems added to give color to the oration.

Modern communication theory is also making an impact on preaching. The preacher operates in a world which is visually oriented, a world in which electronic media affect the way we perceive and learn. Communication theory informs preaching and enables the preacher to explore various forms of communicating the gospel.

The rediscovery of the biblical-theological foundation for preaching is the most hopeful thing that has happened in the field of preaching. While preaching must reflect a broad understanding of sociological and psychological factors, it is ultimately nourished and sustained by dependence on the biblical heritage.

We are also becoming more aware of the significance of a worshipping congregation as the context in which preaching occurs. Preaching is not an isolated practice but is a part of the total worship experience. It is not to be seen as a production by the minister but an opportunity for the whole congregation to offer itself to God. As David H. C. Read has written, "Preaching is an activity of the whole church, and there is an urgent need for a fresh understanding of its nature by those who listen, as well as those who speak."¹

¹ David H. C. Read, Sent From God (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), p. 12.

The dissertation will be approached from an interdisciplinary perspective. The study will draw on the insights of modern communications theory and show how these can inform a concept of preaching. The introductory chapter will examine the status of preaching against the background of some of the crises taking place in the contemporary church. Since the hearing of the Word is the subject of numerous passages in scripture, chapter two of the dissertation will be given to the biblical concept of hearing, both from the Old and New Testament perspectives. The idea will be developed that a person's whole attention and response are involved in the process of hearing.

In chapter 3, attention will be given to the significance of hermeneutics and hearing as reflected in the writings of selected theologians. The concern here will be to explore the relationships between language, biblical text and understanding in preaching. How does one preach in order to bring the text into conversation with our life, to awaken faith in the hearer? Preaching will be looked at from the perspective of enabling persons to enter the biblical message as the story of their lives.

In view of the interdisciplinary approach to the dissertation, one of the major parts of the study, chapter 4, will be centered on the contributions of communications theory to our understanding of the hearing process. The study will draw on findings from social science research in such areas as listening and perception.

A final chapter will seek to develop an integrative model for the sermon, to look at the close relationship between proclamation and hearing. The focus will be on the development of a sermonic style which takes seriously the thesis that the whole church is called to participate in the office of proclamation.

The Role of Preaching in the Contemporary Church

After a decade of being pushed to the periphery of the life of the church, preaching is being rediscovered as a powerful force in shaping the church's mission. During the 1960's, preaching was at a low ebb. One was almost embarrassed to advocate the significance of the sermon. Martin Luther once declared: "For God has decreed that no one can or will believe or receive the Holy Spirit without that Gospel which is preached or taught by word of mouth."² That exalted view of preaching, where the words of the preacher became the means of God's moving with saving power into the human arena, was denigrated in the turbulent decade of the sixties. In seminaries, courses in preaching were among the least popular in the curriculum. Conversation about the ineffectiveness of preaching was widespread and there were predictions concerning the demise of preaching as an element

² Martin Luther, "Sermons on the Gospel of St. John," in his Works (St. Louis: Concordia, 1957), XXII, 54.

in the worship of the church. The focus of ministry shifted to the work of the inner-city projects, discussion or sensitivity groups, liturgical renewal, or avant-garde forms of ministry.

Donald F. Chatfield has listed several factors which led to a decline of interest in preaching. He writes:

There was a consuming interest in action, which would hopefully correct those social wrongs that all our talk had failed to help. There was a growing appreciation of the power of images, particularly those hitting us through the electronic media, which form and mold us in ways that words cannot. There was a theological confusion, almost a vacuum, which made it harder and harder to know what to say. In the midst of this confusion, the only consensus possible seemed to gather around the image of the remnant church, girded with a towel, joining its Lord in the activity of wordless service at the feet of a tired and dusty world.³

These trends have been noted by both sociologists and theologians. Sociologist Jeffrey K. Hadden looked at the widening gap between clergy and laity and recorded his findings in The Gathering Storm in the Churches. Hadden's research led him to conclude that the contemporary church faces a threefold crisis: the struggle over meaning and purpose, the crisis of belief, and the struggle over authority.⁴ Much of the disruption in the church grows out of a difference of opinion between clergy and laity concerning the church's

³ Donald F. Chatfield, "The Rise and Fall of Preaching," United Methodists Today, I: 1 (January 1974), 77.

⁴ Jeffrey K. Hadden, The Gathering Storm in the Churches (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969), p. 6.

mission. A majority of laypersons look to the church as a source of comfort in a turbulent world, while ministers tend to encourage the church to become more deeply involved in achieving social justice.

The lack of aggressiveness on the part of the churches to deal with the injustices which plague our society has prompted a plethora of books critical of the church's failure. Gibson Winter, in The Suburban Captivity of the Churches, deplores the flight of white Protestants to the suburbs, leaving the central city without strong leadership.⁵ Peter Berger's The Noise of Solemn Assemblies takes the church to task for its failure to be faithful to its calling to transform the world. Berger points to the abdication of responsibility by the church and summarizes his position as follows:

... What is characteristic of our church life today is not "innocence" in this sense of religious passion; it is rather in the common American sense of the word "innocent" as a quality of being intellectually untouched, as a euphemism for plain ignorance and obtusiveness, as another way of saying "born yesterday." Religion then becomes a starry-eyed optimism, a naive credulity in the ideologies of the status-quo, something that goes together with an unthinking if benign conservatism in all areas of life. When all is said and done, religion then becomes a solemn ratification of an existence of trying to get along with a minimum of awareness. This is not only humanly reprehensible. It is an offense against the integrity of the Christian commitment.⁶

⁵ Gibson Winter, The Suburban Captivity of the Churches (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961), p. 6.

⁶ Peter L. Berger, The Noise of Solemn Assemblies (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961), pp. 13-14.

The crisis of belief has not made the task of preaching easier. In a time when traditional images of God no longer hold power for masses of people, the preacher's responsibility is awesome! Few preachers can escape being influenced by the confusion in theological thinking. Hadden gives a chronology of the search in contemporary times for a meaningful theology. He calls attention to the "Death of God" movement which brought theological doubt and ambiguity into the open. Hadden sees the "Death of God" theology as "another manifestation of the growing dissatisfaction with the traditional imagery of God."⁷

Further, we are reminded of the impact of Bishop John A. T. Robinson's book, Honest to God.⁸ While this book did not offer a great deal as far as innovative theological insight is concerned, it did introduce to a wide audience the trend in theological circles of repudiating traditional images of God. The debate surrounding the "Death of God" movement and Honest to God came into the public arena and was bound to exert pressure on the task of preaching.

Soon after the publication of Honest to God, Harvey Cox published The Secular City, a book which became a best seller and was the topic of conversation at religious and social gatherings. Cox

⁷ Hadden, p. 18.

⁸ John A. T. Robinson, Honest to God (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963).

deals with the forces of urbanization and secularization and concludes that these forces have enabled man to be free from traditional supernatural concerns. In Cox's view, this movement is something to celebrate rather than depreciate. He writes:

The forces of secularization have no serious interest in persecuting religion. Secularization simply bypasses and undercuts religion and goes on to other things... The age of the secular city, the epoch whose ethos is quickly spreading into every corner of the globe, is an age of "no religion at all." It no longer looks to religious rules and rituals for its morality or its meaning... It will do no good to cling to our religious and metaphysical versions of Christianity in the hope that one day religion or metaphysics will once again be back. They are disappearing forever and that means we cannot let it go and immerse ourselves in the new world of the secular city.⁹

Honest to God and The Secular City sold over a half-million copies and made a tremendous impact on the public's thinking.

Hadden points out that the public response to these publications "has to be understood as a reflection of the growing doubt and uncertainty about the traditional expressions of Christian belief and of the desire to discover new and acceptable images."¹⁰

Questions about orthodox theology were not restricted to conversation and debate among theologians. Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark completed a study in the San Francisco area which revealed considerable diversity in the beliefs of Christian laity. In fact, there was an absence of unanimity on any single doctrinal issue included in

⁹ Harvey G. Cox, The Secular City (New York: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 2-4.

¹⁰ Hadden, p. 22.

the study. In summarizing their findings Glock and Stark indicated that:

The new cleavages are not over such matters as how to worship God properly, but whether or not there is a God of the sort it makes sense to worship; not over whether the bread and wine of communion become the actual blood and body of Christ through transubstantiation, or are only symbolic, but over whether or not Jesus was merely a man.¹¹

The crisis in belief is further accentuated by the trends in church attendance during the 1950's and 60's. Hadden points out that in 1958 church attendance in America was at an all time high. In an average week, 49 percent of all Americans attended church. Since then, there has been a steady decline, so that in 1966 only 44 percent of all Americans attended church in an average week.¹² The general trend in church attendance was recently documented in a Gallup poll. Gallup polling shows that while 49 percent of all Americans reported church attendance in a given week in 1955 and again in 1958, there has been a steady drop since to 40 percent in each of the years from 1971 through 1974.¹³

Church school statistics also reveal a downward trend in participation. For example, during the past decade United Methodist

¹¹ Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark, Religion and Society in Tension (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965), pp. 117-118.

¹² Hadden, p. 25.

¹³ Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), p. 237.

church school enrollment is reported as decreasing 24 percent. In the period between 1968 and 1971, church school enrollment in the United Church of Christ, the Christian Church, and two Presbyterian churches dropped by 19 percent.¹⁴

Trends can also be identified in church membership. For example, there is evidence that the United Methodist Church has fallen below ten million members. The latest official denominational total (1974) was 10,063,046. A recent issue of a national weekly newsletter for United Methodists includes the prediction that total church membership will be between 9,975,000 and 9,985,000. Unofficial reports immediately following annual conference sessions in May and June, 1975, showed that 51 conferences reported losses exceeding 100,000. Only 12 conferences reported gains, totaling 8,000.¹⁵ While these figures may need more precise interpretation, they do serve as an indicator that religious faith does not occupy a position of centrality in the thinking of modern persons.

Coinciding with the decline in church membership and attendance, there are signs of a decline of confidence in the clergy of America. Hadden reports on a Lou Harris poll which revealed that

¹⁴ Michael Leach, "The Future Came Yesterday," Christian Century, XCI:7 (February 20, 1974), 201.

¹⁵ The United Methodist Newscope, III:36 (September 5, 1975), 1.

"only 45 percent of the American public expressed confidence in the clergy." ¹⁶ Politicians ranked only one percentage point worse than the clergy.

In a situation where there is widespread doubt about Christian belief, where there is a divergence of opinion between clergy and laity as to appropriate doctrine, where the public is not persuaded of the necessity of regular church attendance, and where there is an erosion of confidence in the clergy, it is extraordinarily difficult to preach with a sense of authority and power.

The preaching task also has to be looked at in the context of the crisis of authority. Hadden correctly points out that while Protestantism theoretically adheres to the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers, in actual practice the clergy do most of the program planning and make most of the decisions. Hadden writes:

In the past, laity have not objected seriously to the authority structure in their churches. To the extent that they have even been aware of the fact that the clergy were calling most of the shots, they have not been particularly disturbed. But when the rank and file of a voluntary association object to the direction in which the leadership is moving the organization, they begin to exercise their own authority. In Protestantism today, laity, who have entrusted authority to professional leaders, have come to have grave doubts about how the authority has been used, and are beginning to assert their own influence. ¹⁷

The laity can exercise their power by withholding financial support or by withdrawing membership from the church. With the

¹⁶ Hadden, p. 29.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 33-34.

emergence of more lay power in the structures of the church, conflict between laity and clergy has become more extensive than ever. Where this conflict is not resolved satisfactorily, serious disruption often occurs in the life of the church.

The crises of meaning and purpose, of belief, and authority, are interrelated, as Hadden has observed:

Clergy have challenged the traditional role of the church in society because they have reinterpreted the theological basis of their faith and in so doing have come to feel that their faith involves a much more vital commitment to the problems of this world. Laity have challenged the authority of the clergy because they do not share their understanding of the meaning and purpose of the church. The shattering of traditional doctrines has weakened the authority of the clergy, for it is no longer certain that they hold the keys to the kingdom.¹⁸

It seems appropriate to conclude that the crisis in preaching which the church experienced in the decade of the 1960's paralleled the three-fold crisis outlined by Hadden. Further, it is apparent that the crisis in preaching resulted largely from the lack of a clear definition of the role of the preacher. This phenomenon has been referred to as the "crisis of identity" for the clergyman.¹⁹ Hadden says that "the crisis of identity emerges out of the clergyman's internalism of the other crises: meaning and purpose, belief, and authority." He comments:

The clergyman's crisis of identity emerges out of the fact that the value system he has the responsibility of defining, sustaining and

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 36.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 239.

transmitting is in a most serious state of flux... The society is not sure what it believes and it is uncertain as to what the meaning and purpose of the church ought to be. Lacking a clear and coherent notion of the role of religious faith and religious institutions in a changing world, it is also confused about the role of the clergyman. The failure to ascribe clearly defined roles to the clergyman, in turn, leaves the clergyman with considerable ambiguity and lack of clarity as to his role in society.²⁰

What the minister thinks of his own role and the mission of the church often conflicts with the expectations of the congregation. In the past, the minister was considered a "holy man," the spiritual leader of the congregation, the preserver of the institutional church, a pastor who gave a great amount of time to visitation and counseling. With the coming of a new breed of ministers, that image has been shattered and the laity now have difficulty defining what the minister's task should be.

In the kind of cultural and religious setting which characterized the past decade, it is understandable that preaching itself would undergo some crisis. The crises outlined by Hadden can still be detected in the church. There are signs, however, that the Christian community is learning to deal with the struggles in constructive ways. While clergy and laity are frequently in conflict on how the church should face specific social issues, they are beginning to develop some common understandings concerning the church's total mission. Lay persons in the church are becoming more sophisticated theo-

²⁰ Ibid., p. 240.

logically and more sensitive to the involvement of the church in dealing with the world's problems. Clergy are seeking to overcome the isolation between themselves and the laity, reaching out to involve the laity in leadership, decision-making and dealing with the ills of society. One encouraging movement is the development of strong lay education programs. As these programs expand to the rank and file laity in the churches, there will be less friction between clergy and laity and more understanding as to what the church is all about.

Accompanying this new mood or spirit in the church has been a resurgence of interest in preaching. There appears to be a new attitude by theology students toward the importance of preaching. The dean of a theological seminary said that he "senses students are discovering in the experience of preaching a vehicle for the 'testimony of spirit to spirit'--a warm, in-depth sharing of the authentic insights and values at the heart of life, by which process the people of God are nourished."²¹ Another dean put it this way:

Preaching has become the point of intersection or integration at which students are able to bring together what they have learned in the classroom and the insights and understandings of their own personhood.²²

The crisis in preaching during the past decade has forced theo-

²¹ Earl G. Hunt, "Preaching is Being Resurrected," United Methodists Today, 1:1 (January 1974), p. 73.

²² Ibid.

logians, as well as pastors and congregations, to reconsider what preaching is. The church faces a situation in which the charges against ineffective preaching have become quite specific. As Domenico Grasso, a Roman Catholic scholar, has written:

...it is too abstract and unreal; it is fragmentary and lacking in sincerity; its character is mainly moralistic. The preacher does not make contact with the situation of modern man and therefore cannot impress him. The preacher's words, like anachronisms from another age, are bloodless and lifeless; as a result, they leave their hearers cold. Modern preaching does not appear to touch on vital concerns. Today's Christian looks upon the sermon as something which has to be endured because of convention.²³

The resurgence of interest in preaching seems especially noticeable among Roman Catholic scholars. Karl Rahner indicates that one of the burning questions in the teaching and practice of the church today concerns what is referred to as "the trouble with preaching."

Rahner comments:

Preachers and congregations are fully aware of the difficulties designated by that expression. Many leave the church because the language flowing from the pulpit has no meaning for them; it has no connection with their own life and simply bypasses many threatening and unavoidable issues. In fact, the sermon has often been characterized by dogmatizing, by boasting of formal and doctrinaire authority, by moralizing that was frequently arrogant and appeared pharisaical, and by a shunning of daily political or cultural problems which directly affected the church.²⁴

²³

Domenico Grasso, Proclaiming God's Message (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965), p. xi.

²⁴

Karl Rahner, "Preface," in his The Renewal of Preaching (New York: Paulist Press, 1968), p. 1.

Although scholars have pointed to "the trouble with preaching," this criticism needs to be interpreted and put in proper perspective. The fact that sensitive church leaders even bother to turn their critical eyes toward the state of preaching is evidence of the importance they attach to preaching. It demonstrates a lingering hope that preaching will once again find its central place in the church's witness. In the comments on the ineffectiveness of today's pulpit, there appears to be a positive recognition that the strength of the church is tied to a recovery of powerful preaching.

In view of the decline of interest in preaching during the past decade, any signs of renewal will be welcomed enthusiastically. That this concern for preaching has captured the attention of theologians, pastors and congregations signals the possibility of a recovery of vitality in the worship of the Christian community. One of the aspirations underlying this dissertation is to contribute, however modestly, to a recovery of preaching as a true and lively word, as a central concern in the total task of ministry.

CHAPTER II

HEARING IN THE BIBLICAL TRADITION

The Shema: A Call and Response

The primary confession of faith for the Hebrews is summed up in the Shema:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.¹

In the recitation of the Shema, the Hebrews were engaging in an act of worship in which they accepted upon themselves the kingship of God. They were also committing themselves to the commandments of God.² Max Kadushin sees this as a logical relationship, "so that a person shall first accept upon himself the yoke of the kingship of God, and after that accept upon himself the yoke of mizwot (commandments)".³

¹ Deuteronomy 6: 4-9.

² Max Kadushin, Worship and Ethics (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 11.

³ Ibid., p. 79.

The rabbis stress that the recitation of the Shema is a liturgical act in which God's kingship is accepted and his commandments are obeyed. They emphasize the character of these commitments by referring to a parable telling of an early king who was advised by his aides to issue decrees to the people. The king refused to do so until the people accepted his kingship. The king said, "For if they will not accept my kingship they will not accept my decrees."⁴

This calls for complete devotion of the mind and heart, unwavering focusing of attention on the commitments implicit in reciting the Shema. Kadushin suggests that the Shema is to be recited with a kind of sustained concentration, and he quotes a rabbinic authority that "He that reads the Shema must direct his heart."⁵

The Shema is a call and response whereby Israel can testify that God alone is King. "The call is 'Hear, O Israel,' and the response (testimony) is 'The Lord, our God, the Lord is One!'"⁶

Immediately preceding the recitation of the Shema, there is a challenge for Israel to hear and do the commandments of God.

Now this is the commandment, the statutes and the ordinances which the Lord your God commanded me to teach to you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over to possess it...Hear, therefore, O Israel, and be careful to do them... (Deuteronomy 6: 1 and 3).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., p. 83.

⁶ Ibid., p. 259.

A similar admonition also precedes the recitation of the Ten Commandments:

And Moses summoned all Israel, and said to them, 'Hear, O Israel, the statutes and the ordinances which I speak in your hearing this day, and you shall learn them and be careful to do them. (Deuteronomy 5: 1)

The point of the preceding discussion is to illustrate how deeply embedded in the Judaic-Christian heritage is the concept of hearing God's word and responding to it in faithful obedience. The hearing of God's word and the doing of God's will are inextricably bound together. The thrust of this is summed up in the words that Israel uttered at Sinai, after hearing Moses read from the book of the covenant, "all that the Lord has spoken, we shall do and we shall hear." (Exodus 24:7) Another translation puts the verse this way: "All that the Lord has spoken, we will do, and we will be obedient." (Revised Standard Version.) Hearing God's word is not merely reacting to sound in the physical sense, but responding in obedience to God's commandments.

Abraham J. Heschel expresses this idea poetically:

Jewish thought is disclosed in Jewish living. This, therefore, is the way of religious existence. We must accept in order to be able to explore. At the beginning is the commitment, the supreme acquiescence. In our response to His will we perceive His presence in our deeds. His will is revealed in our doing. In carrying out a sacred deed we unseal the wells of faith.⁷

⁷ Abraham J. Heschel, Between God and Man (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), p. 81.

Heschel goes on to say:

Human action is not the beginning. At the beginning is God's expectation. There is an eternal cry in the world: God is beseeching man to answer, to return, to fulfill. Something is asked of man, of all men, at all times. In every act we either answer or defy, we either return or move away, we either fulfill or miss the goal. Life consists of endless opportunities to sanctify the profane, opportunities to redeem the power of God from the chain of potentialities, opportunities to serve spiritual ends.⁸

The witness of the Bible is clear--that to hear the word of God is to do His will. In the biblical understanding, "hearing" rather than "seeing" is the word which denotes man's response to God.

R. C. Dentan has pointed out that

For the mystery religions the highest religious experience was that of "seeing" the god; but for the Bible, where the basic religious attitude is obedience to the divine word, the emphasis is on "hearing" his voice. 'He who is of God' is not the mystic who has seen a vision, but one who 'hears the words of God.' (John 8:47)⁹

Biblical References to Hearing

In both the Old and New Testaments there are many passages which refer to the "ear" or "hearing." While the ear is often mentioned in a physical sense, it derives its deeper significance as a symbol of the whole process of understanding and obedience. The use of the term "ear" is often employed to designate the whole

⁸ Ibid., p. 86.

⁹ R. C. Dentan, "Ear (Hearing)," in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (New York: Abingdon Press, 1962), II, 1.

faculty of understanding. This is illustrated in passages such as Job 13:1, "Lo, my eye has seen all this, my ear has heard and understood it." That hearing clearly involves understanding is implicit in Jesus' saying, "Blessed are your ears, for they hear," (Matthew 13:16), or "He that hath ears, let him hear." (Matthew 13:43)

According to Hebrew psychology, a person's whole attention and response are involved in the process of hearing. Hearing is regarded as a matter which involves the self in its totality. L. H. Brockington has commented on this idea:

There was no conception of a central psychical centre (brain or mind) which could be a kind of clearing house to handle and sort all that passed through the various peripheral organs, nerves and senses. The whole body was the seat of the personality, indeed the body was the person, and every limb and organ was an integral part of the unity of personality. While a particular limb or organ was functioning, the whole self might be, as it were, concentrated in it. When the ear was engaged in hearing the whole psychical activity was acting in and through it... In the hearing of God or of the word of God the whole personality is therefore brought into play.¹⁰

Brockington distinguishes four ways in which God is heard by men.¹¹ The first way mentioned is "direct audition." This is frequently identified with the prophets who are represented as hearing an external voice, a voice from heaven. An example of this is found in Amos 3: 7-8:

¹⁰ L. H. Brockington, "Hear, Harken, Ear, Listen," in Alan Richardson (ed.), A Theological Word Book of the Bible (New York: Macmillan, 1951), pp. 104-105.

¹¹ Ibid.

Surely the Lord God does nothing, without revealing
his secret to his servants the prophets.
The lion has roared: who will not fear?
The Lord God has spoken; who can but prophecy?

"Indirect audition" is the second way in which God is heard by men. Here the voice of God is not heard directly but there is an awareness of God through His activity. The 29th Psalm, for instance, is a poetic utterance in praise of God:

The voice of the Lord is upon the waters;
the God of glory thunders,
The voice of the Lord is powerful,
the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.

The Psalm continues to tell of how the voice of God "breaks the cedars," "flashes forth flames of fire," "shakes the wilderness," and "strips the forests bare."

The third way of hearing God's word is through "intuitive perception." The emphasis here is on understanding God's will and exercising one's own moral judgment in receiving and communicating God's word.

A fourth way in which God is heard is "mediation by prophets." In religious history there have been inspired men who interpreted the word of God to others. An example of this is the challenge which the people of Israel put to Moses concerning God's revelation on Mount Sinai: "Go thou near, and hear all that the Lord our God shall say: and speak thou unto us...and we will hear and do it." (Deuteronomy 5:27) A passage in Romans 10:14 also comes to mind, where Paul

raises the question, "But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?"

Faith and Hearing

Romans, chapter 10, is important for an understanding of what it means to hear the gospel. In this passage, Paul makes a strong case for the inclusiveness of the Christian message and emphasizes that salvation is for all. "No one who believes in Him, the scripture says, will ever be disappointed. Everyone who invokes the name of the Lord shall be saved." (Romans 10:11-12) These statements, in Paul's view, affirm both justification by faith and the universality of salvation. The new relationship to God which is by faith is offered to all, to the Jews and Greeks alike. Salvation is available to those who call upon the name of the Lord, and who respond in glad acceptance and dedication. But this kind of response requires knowledge, and knowledge is possible through what is heard. And, according to Paul, if persons are to hear, there must be a preacher who proclaims the truth.

In commenting on this passage, C. H. Dodd writes:

If God gave the promise, He must have provided the necessary conditions under which men might avail themselves of it. What, then, are the conditions? They are these: (a) You cannot invoke the name of Christ unless you believe in Him; (b) You cannot believe unless you have heard of Him; (c) You cannot hear about Him unless someone preaches the Gospel; (d) No one can preach

the Gospel unless he is sent by God (for the Gospel is not somebody's happy idea, but the word of God.)¹²

What Paul is trying to make clear is that the Jews have had every opportunity to respond in faith, but have failed to do so. They have had a chance to hear the good news of the gospel, but they have not heeded the gospel. The gospel has been proclaimed but it has been ignored. In this connection, William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam point out that the Greek word, *Ἀκοή*, has a double meaning. It means (1) 'hearing,' the faculty by which a thing is heard; (2) 'the substance of what is heard,' a report or message. In Romans 10:16, ("But they have not all heeded the gospel; for Isaiah says, 'Lord, who has believed what he has heard from us? '"), it is used in the second meaning. In verse 17, it shades off into the first, "faith comes by hearing." ¹³

Having made the point that faith is of paramount importance, Paul goes on to say that "faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ." Hearing is seen as integral to the whole preaching event. It is not a peripheral matter, but is

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C. H. Dodd, The Epistle of Paul to the Romans (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1932), p. 169.

13

William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, The Epistle to the Romans (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), p. 297.

central to Christian communication. There is a close connection between hearing the gospel and heeding the gospel. Word and deed are inseparable. This truth is central to both the Old and New Testaments.

The clear implication in this passage from Romans 10 is that the purpose of preaching is the awakening of faith. As Gerald R. Cragg has written:

This provides the proper justification of all preaching. Unless it bears certain marks and is directed toward certain ends, it is nothing more than the most arrogant posturing before God and one another. What sets preaching apart from all other kinds of speech--from lectures on matters of intellectual interest, from moral exhortation on issues of contemporary concern, from comments on the unfolding pattern of events--is that it proclaims Christ and sets forth His abiding significance. The purpose of preaching is so to set forth Christ that He will win men's allegiance, and lead them to the act of self-commitment which is our right response to what we see of God's love in Christ.¹⁴

Hearing and Obeying

There are other New Testament passages which reinforce the theme of hearing and doing the word of God. Consider Matthew 7:

24-27:

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.

¹⁴ Gerald R. Cragg, "The Epistle to the Romans: Exposition," in The Interpreter's Bible (New York: Abingdon Press, 1954), IX, 562.

And everyone who hears these words of mine, and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it.

These verses conclude the Sermon on the Mount. The claim is that the life of the hearers of the Sermon will stand firm or collapse according to whether they do or fail to do what Jesus has taught. The illustration reflects Palestinian climatic conditions. There are few heavy rains during the year and most of the streams cease to flow in the dry season. In the rainy season heavy rains fall, sudden torrents rush down the valleys, and what had been dry level places are flooded. A "prudent" man will build on solid rock to withstand the conditions of the rainy season. A "foolish" man builds on pleasant ground, where sudden flood waters sweep away the sandy soil and the house collapses. So, Jesus teaches, obedience to his teaching is the one solid basis for withstanding the future crisis. As A. W. Argyle points out:

The rock is hearing and doing. The sand is hearing without doing. In the day of crisis, the one man stands firm, the other goes under. Therefore, do not merely hear the teaching; act on it. "It is not by hearing the law, but by doing it, that men will be justified before God." (Romans 2:13). "Be sure that you act on the message and do not merely listen; for that would be to mislead yourselves." (James 1:22) ¹⁵

¹⁵ A. W. Argyle, The Gospel According to Matthew (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), pp. 63-64.

In connection with this passage, William Barclay says that Jesus demanded two things. He demanded that men should listen and that men should do.

"Knowledge only becomes relevant when it is translated into action. Knowledge must become action; theory must become practice; theology must become life. If we are to be in any sense followers of Jesus, we must hear and do." ¹⁶

The word in which hearing and doing are summed up is the word "obedience." It is Jesus' claim that obedience to Him is the only sure foundation for life.

Martin Luther elaborates on this in a commentary on Matthew 7: 24-27:

"The doctrine is a good and precious thing, but it is not being preached for the sake of being heard but for the sake of action and its application to life. Particularly since we are always in danger from false prophets and miracle workers, we should think it over and accept this teaching and warning, while we still hear it, both as teachers and pupils. If we want to put it off until our little hour strikes and death and the devil come storming in with their rainstorms and tempests, then we have delayed too long. Therefore, we must not only hear and be able, but actually do and fight." ¹⁷

One phrase which was frequently on the lips of Jesus was the refrain, "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear." (Matthew 13:43). A similar phrase occurs in Matthew 11:15 and in 13:9, as well as

¹⁶ William Barclay, The Gospel of Matthew (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956) I, pp. 295-297.

¹⁷ Martin Luther, "The Sermon on the Mount and the Magnificat," in his Works (St. Louis: Concordia, 1956), XXI, 281.

other New Testament passages. In this statement, Jesus urges his hearers to give their serious attention to what he had to say. On one occasion, Jesus told the parable of the Sower and the Seed (Matthew 13: 3-8). He ended the parable by using this recurring phrase, "He who has ears, let him hear."

Because of its familiarity, the parable of the Sower needs little elaboration. During the period of Jesus' open preaching to the crowds, he had found all the classes of hearers enumerated in the parable. Floyd V. Filson has pointed out that Jesus described four classes of hearers in this parable:¹⁸

- 1) The unresponsive hearer. The evil one, Satan, represented by the birds, comes and carries off the seed and man loses his opportunity to respond.
- 2) The shallow hearer, who lacks deep roots. He makes a start in receiving the word and entering upon the life of faith, but he lacks depth and persistence.
- 3) The worldly hearer, who lets concern for material things crowd out his loyalty to God.
- 4) The intelligent, fruitful hearer, He hears, understands and bears abundant fruit in the life of faith and obedience.

¹⁸

Floyd V. Filson, The Gospel According to Matthew (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), pp. 160-161.

Jesus follows the parable by saying, "Listen, understand and heed, because this story illustrates an important truth. Understanding the divine purpose is not given to all, but only to those who through repentance, faith and obedience show forth their loyalty to God. Without commitment, one might hear but will fail to grasp "the mysteries of the Kingdom of Heaven." (Matthew 13:11).

The concept of obedience as embracing both the hearing and doing of God's word stands out with unmistakable clarity in the encounter between Jesus and Pilate, the Roman governor who had jurisdiction over Palestine (John 18: 28-40). Jesus had been arrested by Jewish authorities and brought before Pilate. Pilate, after hearing the accusations against Jesus, suggested that the Jews handle this case themselves. They responded that it was not within their power to put any man to death.

As we try to overhear what is taking place in this passage, it is evident that Pilate is dissatisfied with the charges which have been brought against Jesus. He goes back into his headquarters and summons Jesus for a private conversation. Pilate is fairly certain that the real charge lying behind the Jews' trumped-up case is sedition. Pilate, however, does not see Jesus presenting any real threat to the emperor. So, he puts the question, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus' reply took the form of a question, asking whether Pilate was raising an honest question or whether his query was

merely echoing Jewish accusations. Pilate sneeringly replied, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have handed you over to me; What have you done?" With this question, Jesus goes to the heart of the charge against him--the matter of kingship. At no point does Jesus deny his kingship, but he gives it an entirely different interpretation. He disavows kingship as the world understands it, a kingship with all the trappings of earthly power and political maneuvering. Had his kingship been political in nature, his followers, Jesus maintains, would have resorted to military tactics in an effort to set him free. But Jesus insists that his kingly authority is not derived from earthly power. Jesus says that his kingship belongs to the realm of truth. This word seems foreign to Pilate and in a cynical manner he says to Jesus, "What is truth?" Jesus identifies his purpose for coming to the world as bearing witness to the truth. "For this I was born, and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears my voice." (John 18: 37).

This meeting between Jesus and Pilate is charged with drama. Pilate represents one kind of kingdom, a sovereignty based on force and earthly power. Jesus makes the point that his kingship is of an entirely different order. His sovereignty is that of outgoing love. This is the mark of his kingdom, and those who commit themselves in obedience to this truth are able to hear what Jesus says.

In this remarkable passage Jesus identifies truth with the true knowledge of God. He has not come to set up His own kingdom, but to reveal God whose kingdom supersedes that of any earthly authority. It is a kingdom of love, of righteousness, of goodwill. It is this kingdom, not one built on political or military power, to which Jesus gives testimony. And only those who embrace the vision of life represented in this new kind of kingdom are able to really hear what Jesus has to say. If we are obedient to God, we will hear the words of God, and if the words of God make an impact on our consciousness, we will follow in obedience. To hear the word of God is to respond with a life devoted to bearing witness to the truth, to pattern our lives after a model of obedience and servanthood. Hearing and obeying--this response ushers us into that kingdom which alone has reality and permanence.

It is important to hear what Jesus is saying about the nature of God's sovereignty. We have a duty to hear as well as to put the word into action. Unless we hear with some accuracy, the action we take may not be consistent with the purposes of God's kingdom. The words of Jesus, "Take heed then how you hear," (Luke 8:18) have critical significance for our grasp and understanding of the truth. The distinguishing mark of those who belong to the kingdom is that they are truly attentive to the word of God and faithful in putting it into action. They hear the word of God and they do it.

In this chapter, the concept of hearing in the biblical tradition has been explored, both from the Old and New Testament perspectives. The theme which comes up repeatedly is that the hearing and doing of God's word must be held together. To hear the word of God is to do His will. In the process of hearing, a person's whole attention and response are involved. The appropriate gesture for one who has heard God's word is to respond with a life of obedience.

CHAPTER III

HERMENEUTICS AND THE HEARING OF THE WORD

The Shape of the Problem

In an address to Christian educators and teachers, Paul Tillich raised a fundamental question for anyone who is concerned about the impact of the Christian gospel in our time.

"How shall the message be focused for the people of our time? In other words, we are concerned here with the question: How can the gospel be communicated? We are asking: How do we make the message heard and seen, and then either rejected or accepted?"¹

The seriousness of that question can be seen in the fact that the very survival and vitality of the Christian faith is at stake. Christian communication today is a monumental task. It involves the attempt to convey in modern language the meaning of an event which happened two thousand years ago. Jesus was born in an ancient culture. Thought patterns were different, reality was perceived differently, and meanings were expressed in language congenial to the people of that time. There is no question that Jesus made a difference in the lives of his contemporaries. The sick were healed, the blind re-

¹ Paul Tillich, Theology of Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 201.

ceived their sight, the lame were made whole and the weak and defeated found new sources of strength. The stories in the New Testament have come to us as a record of God's dealing with His people-- finding them, saving and delivering them, giving guidance and hope. The early disciples met Jesus and heard His word. Their lives were transformed. They tried to express the meaning of their encounter with Jesus in songs and poems and symbolic language. This is the word that has come down to us across two thousand years. The burden of preaching is to articulate the gospel in such a way that the experience which gave birth to the biblical text is reproduced in the lives of modern hearers. This is why a hermeneutical approach to the teaching and preaching of the church is essential for effective Christian communication.

Paul J. Achtemeier helps define the shape of this problem:

What is at stake, when one broaches the problem of hermeneutics, is nothing less than the biblical basis of Christian faith and theology. The hermeneutical question, as we shall approach it, concerns the fundamental problem of whether it is possible to put an ancient text (the Bible) at the basis of an affirmation of faith designed to be understood, and taken seriously, by modern man. Can a past event, and the text to which it gave birth, have any real significance for my life, now? ... For unless the biblical text and the kind of reality to which it points, can in fact give meaning to life in the present age, then the need for the Christian faith, to say nothing of Christian theology, has been seriously compromised, if not eliminated. The hermeneutical question, therefore, concerns itself with the possibility of Christian faith and theology in the modern world.²

² Paul L. Achtemeier, An Introduction to the New Hermeneutic (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969), p. 13.

Definitions

The terms "hermeneutics" and "exegesis" have often been used interchangeably. Recently, however, efforts have been revived to probe the concept of hermeneutics in its full meaning. The word "hermeneutics" is a derivative of a Greek verb "herméneuein," which carries the meaning of speaking, translation and interpretation. As traditionally understood, hermeneutics has a threefold emphasis: exegesis, the process of determining the original meaning of a biblical text and what the author was trying to convey to his readers; interpretation, the attempt to apply the meaning of the text to modern day hearers; and hermeneutics, the principles to follow in moving from exegesis to interpretation. The whole hermeneutical approach has to do with opening the biblical texts in such a way that their meaning touches the realities of contemporary experience.

Hermeneutical Theology

The research and writing of James M. Robinson have been pivotal in developing a hermeneutical theology. He feels that interpretation and translations are inextricably bound together. The term

"translation," in its common usage, refers to the movement from one place to another. Robinson says that "the new hermeneutic has to do with the slippery business of translating meaning."³ What is involved in the translation of meaning from one culture to another, from one situation to the other. Robinson goes further in describing the close connection between translation and interpretation:

The interrelatedness of translation and interpretation may be conversely illustrated by recalling that the verb to interpret can also mean to translate, just as an oral translator is normally called an interpreter... If to translate is basically to interpret, translation coincides with the task of hermeneutic. Indeed, hermeneutic itself is a term whose original breadth of meaning has been rather arbitrarily narrowed. The Greek verb meant to proclaim and to translate as well as to interpret. Hence the modern technical meaning of hermeneutic as a theory of interpretation derives from a broader meaning that includes translation, exegesis and proclamation.⁴

In this understanding, hermeneutics has to do with the movement of God's word as expressed in the Bible, into contemporary settings so that it speaks with meaning to modern persons. This means much more than merely replacing biblical vocabulary with one's own language. The intent is to convey the meaning which is gathered up in biblical language, to state in modern language the

³ James M. Robinson, "Hermeneutic Since Barth," in The New Hermeneutic (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 4.

⁴ James M. Robinson, "Theology As Translation," in Theology Today, XX (1964), 519.

meaning which gave birth to the biblical text. Robinson makes the point that:

Contemporary theology is not concerned about retaining the veneer of biblical language. Rather, it is concerned with what happens in the church's witness, it is concerned that what happens should be in material continuity with the stream of wholesome occurrences going back to Jesus. The situational analysis carried on by the contemporary theologian as he speaks is structurally analogous to that of the biblical historian as he listens. And what the contemporary theologian hopes will happen as his word strikes home is the contemporary equivalent of what the historian hears taking place in the valid Christian witness of the past.⁵

The thrust of this is that contemporary theology has an enormous task on its hands. It is challenged to restate ancient biblical affirmations in such a way that the meaning of the affirmations is retained and communicated to our time. As Robinson has written, "Theology as translation is theology responsible to the point of the tradition. Theology as translation is theology responsible for making the point in the language of the present."⁶

The Significance of Language

Translation, then, is to interpret, and interpretation takes place in language. Robinson points out that "language is already the

⁵ James M. Robinson, "Hermeneutical Theology," Christian Century, LXXXIII (1966), 581-582.

⁶ Robinson, "Theology as Translation," p. 527.

beginning of the hermeneutical process. For language itself is the bringing to expression, the exposition, of an understanding."⁷

Language is not to be thought of as a mere tool, a way of referring to objective realities. Language is the fundamental way of expressing personality and is the door to meaningful existence. As Paul Tillich has expressed it:

In language, communications becomes mutual participation in a universe of meanings... Man has language because he has a world, and he has a world because he has language.⁸

Biblical Words and Biblical Meaning

It is through language that meaning is conveyed. Part of the problem, however, has to do with the finiteness of language. That is to say, the language of one historic period may differ greatly from the language of another period. It is the cultural conditioning of language that adds to the magnitude of the task of communicating biblical meaning for today. If biblical meaning is to hold power for modern persons, it must be transferred into the language of our time and place.

In this connection, it is instructive to point out that sometimes the mere repetition of biblical words can obscure biblical

⁷ Ibid., p. 519.

⁸ Paul Tillich, Systematic Theology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), I, 58.

meaning. Tillich has helped us understand that:

The Biblical words are human words, created by the development of languages under many different influences. The Biblical language is neither a divine language nor a divinely dictated human language. The Biblical language is the human expression of the state of revelatory ecstasy which the Bible writers have experienced. They express their experience in a human way, each in his own language.⁹

Tillich goes further in stressing that if churches are to carry out their communicative task, they must

...discover anew the reality which was apprehended in earlier times and which in essence is the same today, and then present it in quite new terms. Only then can they understand that reality on the basis of what the old words intended.¹⁰

James Robinson puts it another way:

God is crying out to be heard in our daily lives, and it is the task of proclamation to carry through the word-event inaugurated by Jesus by saying in human language what God has to say to us so that it is heard--whereas all too often a doctrine of the word of God leaves what God has to say on a remote pedestal of biblical language, so that one must infer God has nothing to say about my life where I am actually living it. If the meaning intended in biblical language has a critical function in identifying God's word within the broad and ambiguous linguisticity of existence, it is only when that meaning brings to expression what God has to say to me ¹¹in my world that this meaning is authenticated as God's word.

⁹ Paul Tillich, "The Word of God," in Language (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957), p. 126.

¹⁰ Quoted in James Luther Adams, Paul Tillich's Philosophy of Culture, Science and Religion (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 11.

¹¹ Robinson, "Theology as Translation," pp. 525-26.

Approaching the Biblical Text

With all this in mind we have some guidance in approaching a specific text. It corrects any impression one might have that the New Testament is a mere record of historical events. The biblical texts stand to be proclaimed. New Testament writing had its origin in proclamation. As Manfred Mezger has written of the biblical texts: "They once were preaching, they are preaching; essentially, therefore, they can again become preaching today."¹² Gerhard Ebeling expresses this even more forcefully:

The process from text to sermon can therefore be characterized by saying: Proclamation that has taken place is to become proclamation that takes place. The transition from text to sermon is a transition from scripture to the spoken word. Thus the task prescribed here consists in making what is written into spoken word, or, as we can now also say in letting the text become God's word again.¹³

Thus, the text is to be brought into conversation with our lives. Any approach to the text which suggests that I can take a disinterested or uninvolved stance toward the reality witnessed to in the text is a

¹² Manfred Mezger, "Preparation for Preaching--The Route from Exegesis to Proclamation," in R. Bultmann et al. Translating Theology into the Modern Age (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 165.

¹³ Gerhard Ebeling, "Word of God and Hermeneutic," in The New Hermeneutic (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 107.

distorted understanding. The intention of the text is to be proclaimed. It confronts hearers with the decision of faith, to decide whether the vision of reality expressed in a text will become the center around which all existence is organized. The text, then, becomes an illumination of our experience. It is the story of our lives. It speaks of our relationship with God. As Ebeling has written:

In dealings with the text its being interpreted by us turns into our being interpreted by the text... For the word that once happened and in happening became the text must again become word with the help of the text and thus happen as interpreting word.¹⁴

This internalization of the biblical message has been put in a striking image by H. Richard Niebuhr. In describing how revelation takes place when we receive the biblical history as our history, Niebuhr shows that the power of an external event can become our own inner history.¹⁵ He points out that there are two ways of knowing about the world. One, which he calls external history, is all those experiences of history which are available through eye-witness accounts, history books and such things as experiments which can be duplicated and verified in a science laboratory. In the Christian tradition, such external history includes the "historical" Jesus, a

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 68.

¹⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, The Meaning of Revelation (New York: Macmillan, 1941), p. 44.

record of ideas, reports and beliefs which are found in the New Testament.

Second, there is internal history, which is the personal story each person carries around about "his" time. It has to do with values, feelings, thought and will, and human association in community. As Niebuhr expresses it:

In external history, we deal with objects; in internal history our concern is with subjects. In the former, our data are "eds," what is believed, sensed, conceived; but in the latter what is given is always an "ing," a knowing, a willing, a believing, a feeling. Or as Martin Buber put it, in external history, all revelations are between an "I" and an "it," while in the other they are revelations between "I" and "Thou." ¹⁶

It is in our internal history that the biblical events have meaning. Our self-understanding is illumined when we see the biblical events not as external bits of information coming to us out of antiquity, but as the interpretation of our existence and the ground plan of our lives. We enter the biblical history as our own, and in this internalization of its persons and events, God's revelation of himself makes an impact on the contours of our existence.

Biblical Preaching

Biblical preaching, therefore, is not merely expounding on a biblical text. John Knox has made the point that in biblical preaching

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 47-48.

the biblical event is recurring. He writes:

The God who acted in the events out of which the church arose acts afresh in the preacher's word. The preaching of the gospel is itself a part of the gospel. The true biblical preacher is not merely discussing events of the past, nor is he merely drawing edifying lessons out of his life. In his inspired words the past event is happening again. True preaching is itself an event--and an event of a particular kind. In it the revelation of God in Christ is actually recurring.¹⁷

There is vitality in preaching when it puts us in touch with the events witnessed to in the Bible, and draws us into participation in the life which is expressed in the biblical text. The word of God is heard through preaching that has a quality of eventfulness, that brings the text alive in our experience today.

¹⁷ John Knox, The Integrity of Preaching (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), pp. 22-23.

CHAPTER IV

HEARING AND COMMUNICATION THEORY

COMMUNICATION: A DEFINITION

The focus of this chapter will be on selected models or views of communication and how these can inform a concept of preaching. Recent studies in human communication offer the possibility of greatly enhancing the communicative task of the church. Communication as a fundamental fact of human existence has been around since the beginning of human history. But communication as a serious study is a relatively new discipline which has emerged within the last 25 years. As the field of communication has developed into a more precise discipline, considerable attention has been given to defining what communication is all about.

The term "communication" has generally been used as a way of referring to the transmission of information or denoting the interchange of thoughts and ideas between persons. The concept of communication, however, as the mere act of transmitting or sharing information does not gather up the dynamic factors involved in human interaction. David Berlo has developed the thesis that communication is a process by which meanings are exchanged between individuals or

groups of persons.¹ The nature of a process is its dynamic quality; it is not static. It moves and implied continuous interaction. Communication is a living word which relates more to an organism, where there is interaction between the various parts, than it does to the static view of mere transference of information. Colin Cherry has attempted to express this view in defining communication:

Perhaps the simplest and broadest definition of the word "communication" is afforded by the statement: "It is that which links any organism together." Here "organism may mean two friends in conversation, newspapers and their reading public, a country and its postal system. At another level, it may refer to the nervous system of an animal, while at another it may relate to a civilization and its culture. When communication ceases, the organism breaks up."²

Reuel L. Howe has suggested that in every encounter between persons, they bring meanings out of their lives that are available for communication. Out of this understanding, he says that "communication occurs whenever there is a meeting of meaning between two or more persons."³ William F. Fore puts it this way: "Communication means imparting something about existence by means of common-

¹ David K. Berlo, The Process of Communication (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960), pp. 168-189.

² Colin Cherry, "The Communication of Information," American Scientist, XL (1952), 640-63.

³ Reuel L. Howe, The Miracle of Dialogue (New York: Seabury Press, 1963), pp. 22-23.

ly understood relationships between man and man, man and his environment, or man's environment and environment."⁴ All these definitions point to communication as a dynamic process, and it is against this background that we consider modern communication theory and the illumination it brings to preaching.

SELECTED MODELS OF COMMUNICATION

Because of the many intricacies involved in the communication process, a variety of models has been developed in order to arrive at some understandings of how communication takes place. A brief review and description of these models will help put in perspective some of the basic ingredients in the communication process.

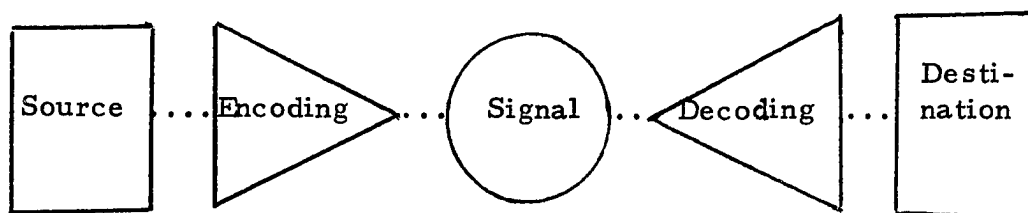
1. Linear Model

One of the first models to be developed is one which might be referred to as a "Linear" model. This rather traditional model was first given shape by Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver of Bell Telephone laboratories and, thus, has come to be identified as the "Shannon-Weaver Mode."⁵ The following diagram shows the essential

⁴ William F. Fore, "What is Communication?", in B. F. Jackson, Jr. (ed.) Communication (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), I, 28.

⁵ Claude E. Shannon and Warren Weaver, A Mathematical Theory of Communication (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1949), p. 5.

ingredients in this model of communication:



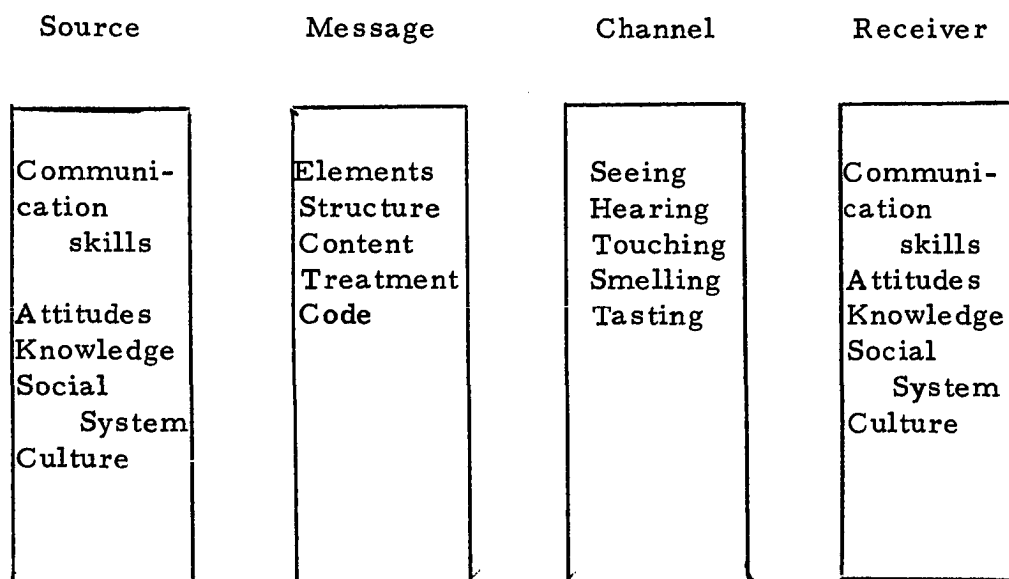
Although Shannon and Weaver were primarily concerned with electronic communication, the model they developed was soon adapted for use by scholars and students in the field of human communication. The representation can be read without great difficulty. Information originates with a source which determines the intention for whatever information is to be communicated. Encoding refers to the selection of the code for transmission, whether it be words, records, radio, television or some other medium. The signal has reference to the kind of energy used for the transmission of information. The energy may be electrical as in the case of radio or television, or mechanical, as in conversation between two persons. As the information moves along, there is a decoding process. This is the reverse of encoding and requires the receiver to interpret the information in terms of his own understanding and how he views the sender, as well as knowledge of the code used in transmission. The receiver is the particular audience to which the information is addressed. Experimental studies support commonly held understanding that knowledge of the audience

is an important component in planning for effective communication.

2. Sender- Message- Channel- Receiver Model

David K. Berlo has attempted to provide insights into the communication process by devising a model referred to as the SMCR model.⁶ Berlo's model is more congenial to the study of human communication than the Shannon-Weaver model, primarily because it shows in more detailed fashion the various aspects of the interaction process.

Berlos's SMCR Model

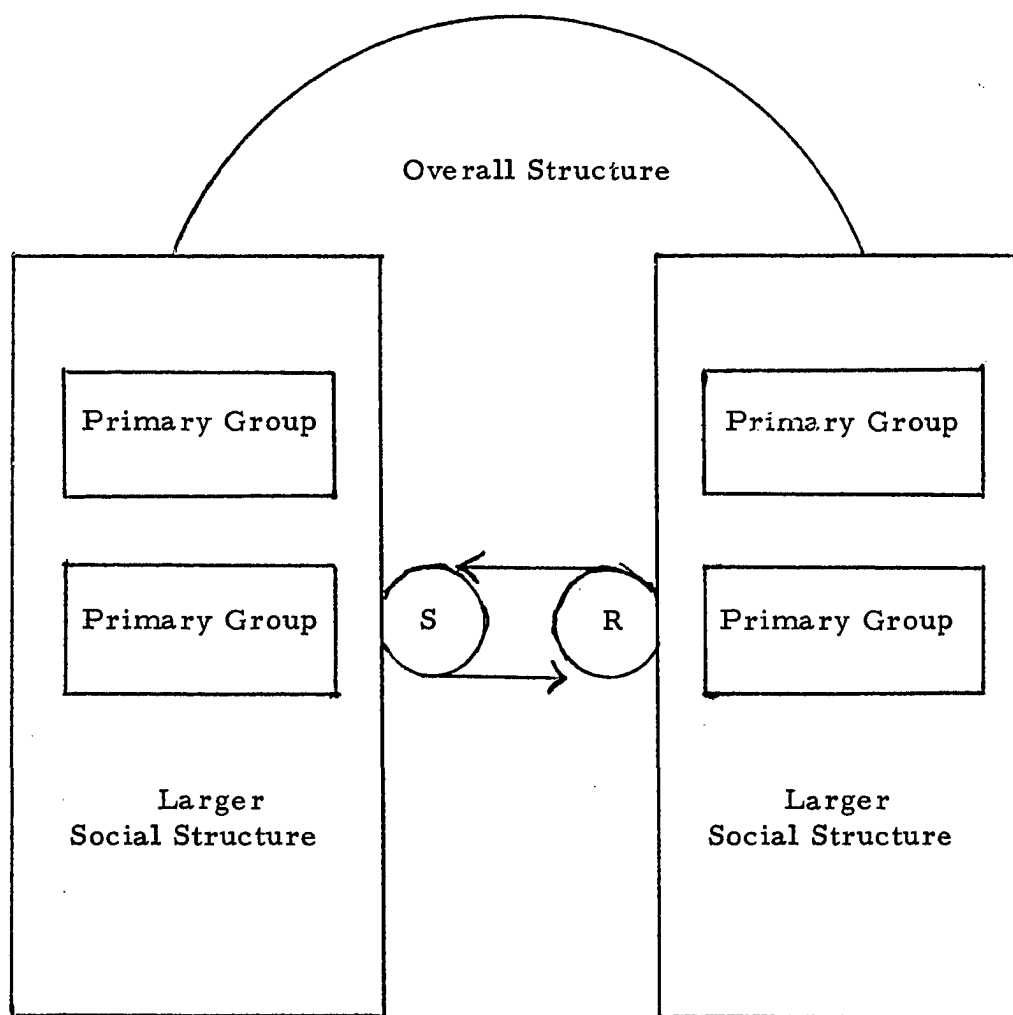


⁶ Berlo, p. 72.

The main concepts of this source-message-channel-receiver model can be summarized rather briefly. In order for effective communication to take place, both the source and the receiver must develop essential communication skills, possess attitudes that are conducive to creative interaction, acquire knowledge that would undergird the content of the message and facilitate its reception, and be sensitive to the social structures in which they function and the larger cultural system of which they are a part. The message which flows between source and receiver can be broken down into parts, such as words, sentences and ideas. These parts make up the elements of a message. Furthermore, the message has a certain structure, revealing the pattern in which the various parts are organized. The content has to do with the central thrust of the message, the substantive matter being communicated. Treatment is a comprehensive term which refers to the total approach to the message, its content, organization and delivery. Code covers that process of finding the most appropriate and accurate means of expressing the message. The source is always faced with the decision of selecting the channel or channels to convey the message. To illustrate this, the source may wish to use a personal conversation, a telephone contact or a letter. In some instances, a combination of channels may be employed. In any case, the channel selected is an important link in the whole communication process.

3. Communication and the Social System

Another model which helps us see communication in the context of social structures was devised by sociologists John and Matilda Riley.⁷ The following diagram will be useful in understanding this model:



⁷ John W. Riley, Jr., and Matilda White Riley, "Mass Communication and the Social System," in Sociology Today (New York: Basic Books, 1959).

The sender and receiver are members of small communities, such as family, clubs, and social organizations. These can be referred to as primary groups. In addition, both sender and receiver are part of a wider sphere, such as the neighborhood or district or nation. Furthermore, there is a total social situation in which communication takes place and we think here specifically of a common language and culture. All these factors have an impact on the communication process. Both sender and receiver bring to the process the influence of their respective primary groups and wider social structure.

4. Global Model

Marshall McLuhan has articulated a concept which might be called a global model of communication.⁸ In contrast to the linear model, McLuhan would point out that there is no beginning and end to the communication process. In other words, the process is not unidirectional. The model does allow for feedback, but McLuhan emphasizes that the feedback loop is getting smaller and smaller. The reason for this is that we are experiencing an implosion rather than explosion. Whereas explosion pointed to the breaking up of the

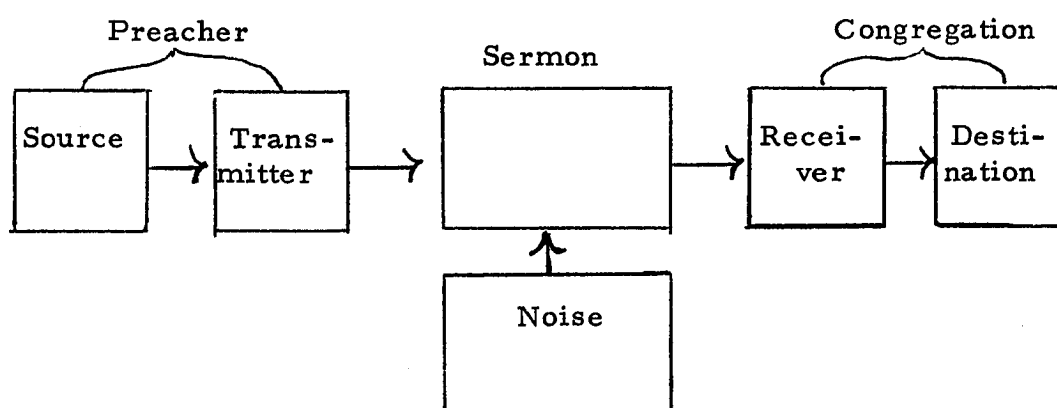
⁸ Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, The Medium is the Message (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), p. 63.

world, implosion implies that the world is coming together. The entire atmosphere in which we live is charged with communication. Rather than thinking in a linear sense, we are probing or reaching out in all directions. This means it is possible to draw in from our environment any number of things and make them part of our life's meanings.

In the global model, life is being reshaped in a massive and radical way. The media revolution is creating a new reality. The implosion is bringing people into closer contact with one another and the potential for involvement has accelerated greatly. While this may bring uncertainties, it offers a chance to grow and explore new and creative ways for strengthening human relationships.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PREACHING

In adapting the Shannon-Weaver model for preaching, Clement Welsh arranges the various elements as follows:⁹



⁹ Clement Welsh, Preaching in a New Key (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1974), p. 27.

In this simple diagram, the functions of source and transmitter reside in the preacher. The message originates with him and he puts the message in a form which can be communicated. The congregation exercises the functions of receiving the message and appropriating it for their own lives. The channel for the sermon is the voice and non-verbal communication of the preacher. In any congregational setting, a certain amount of distraction, or noise, is bound to occur, and this noise provides a form of competition for the preacher. It is difficult for the preacher to command full attention when a young child slips out of the front pew and runs down the aisle of the sanctuary.

Consider some of the implications for the preacher as communicator which are found in the various models of communication.

Establishing Credibility.

Studies have shown that the credibility of the communicator, as perceived by the audience, is a significant factor in determining his effectiveness. C. I. Hovland and W. Weiss did a study which revealed that trustworthiness of the source had immediate effect on the acceptance of the message.¹⁰ People are inclined to accept a message from someone in whom they have confidence.

¹⁰ C. I. Hovland and W. Weiss, "The Influence of Source Credibility on Communication Effectiveness," Public Opinion Quarterly, XV (1951), 635-650.

This rather obvious finding speaks directly to the situation of the preacher as a communicator. The congregation views the minister from varied perspectives. He is seen as an authoritative figure, bringing some message from God. The congregation recognizes that the preacher belongs to a system and is related to institutional structures. They see him as having a unique relationship to the spiritual dimension. They think of him as having intellectual acumen and professional abilities. But, essentially, the preacher stands before the congregation as a person. He is one person speaking and sharing with other persons. What the preacher is as a person has an inescapable bearing on the acceptance of his message.

Credibility as a preacher requires a consistency between what he proclaims and how he lives. Helmut Thielicke makes a strong point concerning the preacher's credibility. By this, he means that the preacher must live in the house of his own preaching. "What the preacher says in the pulpit must have a relationship to what fills the rest of his existence."¹¹ The preacher cannot merely live alongside his message. There is a great yearning for credibility, and there must not be a dichotomy between the house of life and the house of doctrine. Thielicke makes the point that if our preaching has become unbelievable and unconvincing, "the trouble lies deep in our actual

¹¹ Helmut Thielicke, The Trouble with the Church (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 5.

spiritual condition, in a pathological condition of our Christian existence."¹² Preaching is a task which requires that we share our commitment and some of our most profound experiences with other persons. The preacher is called to be an incarnation of the gospel he proclaims. In the congregation there are persons who desire the word of God from someone who has heard it himself. The moral integrity of the preacher is far more important than his learning and eloquence. In a real sense, the sermon becomes an expression of the person as he seeks to share with others what he has found to be profoundly true.

Recovering a Sense of Identity

The recovery of a sense of identity is closely related to the problem of credibility. The preacher needs to be intimately acquainted with himself. He needs to know who he is. The self-image of the preacher inevitably projects itself in the communication process.

In our time, a great deal has been written about the fragmentation of the minister and his loss of identity. Kyle Haselden has suggested that the loss of significant purpose in the minister's calling has had several disintegrating effects.¹³

¹² Ibid., p. 18.

¹³ Kyle Haselden, The Urgency of Preaching (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), pp. 103-106.

The first consequence is that the preacher has placed greater "accent on amiability." As a result of seeking the approval of all persons, his ministry has thinned out to inconsequentials. He may have gained the favor of all members of the church and community, but at the expense of a sharp focus for his ministry. A second result of the loss of professional identity is that the preacher resorts to sentimentality. He proclaims a truncated gospel, offering words of cheerfulness without an accent on the judgment of God. The third consequence is the inclination of the minister to get involved in all kinds of activities. It is a constant temptation to become engaged in every community effort and suffer fragmentation in the process. As Haselden puts it:

The pull of the world's needs is strong on us and it should be; to neglect those needs is to disown the God who "so loved the world." But the clergy's primary and pre-emptive mission is not to be the custodian of a culture or the architects of a better world. Ministers are not sent to be the lackeys of every good cause, signatories of excellent resolutions and worthy petitions, or even primarily to be champions of justice. They are sent to speak for that Christ who is sovereign over man's whole psychic and social realm.¹⁴

A fourth result of the loss of professional clarity is that the minister surrenders himself to the wrong authority. He surrenders to intimidation and lets his ministry be shaped by the moods and desires of the people, preaching what they want to hear rather than

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 105.

the judgment and mercies of God. The minister's vocation is blurred if he sees himself as a mere employee, hired to dispense soothing words that lack the radical claims of the gospel.

One clue to a recovery of the preacher's identity is found in the words of the apostle Paul. "Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel." (I Corinthians 9: 16). Paul is totally absorbed by the necessity to preach. What did he mean by that expression? "What he feared," says Haselden, "was that a refusal to preach the gospel entrusted to him would collapse the center of his being. The preaching of the gospel was his *raison d'etre*... To be Paul was to be man-preaching the gospel; to cease preaching the gospel was to cease being Paul."¹⁵ The identity question for Paul was settled through his engagement in the service of Christ.

Every preacher must settle the identity question to be an effective communicator of the gospel. We do preach ourselves. Our self-image, our attitudes and sympathies, our feelings and loyalties are transmitted in the delivery of the sermon. But if we preach only ourselves, the laity are perceptive enough to sense that we are purveyors of a message that has not touched us existentially or shaped our lives in the image of Christ. The minister's recovery of professional identity will be found only in obedience to Christ and the

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 113.

proclamation of that gospel which frees one from the necessity of pretending or hiding behind a professional facade.

Understanding the Dynamics of Communication

The preaching event is a process in which the preacher and the congregation interact with each other. The preacher and his listeners bring to the sermon certain skills, attitudes, knowledge and cultural background.

The Meaning of Perception. It is important for the minister to know the relation of perception to communication. People view reality from different perspectives. We bring to any situation or relationship our own history, our points of view, our values and beliefs. In any communication, including the delivery of the sermon, these perceptions are brought into play and have a powerful influence on how the message is received.

One way of looking at perception is to consider that each of us has a "central self" or private world, and around that self there is a perceptual screen which is somewhat analogous to an air filter in an automobile. Another way of saying this is that there is an interaction between a person and his environment. The person sorts out from the environment those bits of experience which are consistent with his self-image, and which do not threaten his well being. As the preacher learns to read these perceptions, he comes to understand that mean-

ing is in persons and this meaning can vary from person to person because of the factor of perception. Meaning is found not merely in the messages which are transmitted, but in the persons involved in the communication process. A person's past experience, his entire history, his anticipation of the moment and his interaction with whatever is before him--all these factors have something to say about how a message is received.

Principles of Communication. Not only does the preacher need to be sensitive to the meanings which are in persons, he should also be familiar with the principles of communication which are operative in the communication process. Knowledge of these principles and understanding their applicability can facilitate the hearing of the message.

Consider, therefore, a brief description of several important communication principles.¹⁶

1) Redundancy. Redancy is a way of reinforcing one's message. While it is true that in most any written or oral presentation there is information which can be deleted without altering the essential meaning, it is important to find ways of repeating the message to make it as clear as possible. The problem with repetition

¹⁶ Fore, pp. 42-48.

is to identify ways of reinforcing a message to avoid boredom.

Appropriate gestures can be a way of strengthening what we say. One minister used the principle of redundancy by placing an outline of his sermon in the worship bulletin. Another minister makes regular use of a blackboard in connection with the delivery of the sermon, especially at Sunday evening services. The church has a unique opportunity to reinforce its message through the use of media and expressive forms such as the dance.

2) Feedback. This term has a technical history, but in common parlance feedback implies that both sender and receiver are participants in the communication system. Feedback is the process of responding to the cues which the receiver of a message sends back to the source. It is a way of correcting and controlling the messages which are fed into the communication system. Through feedback, the source is able to determine the effectiveness of the communication, for the source is constantly getting cues from the receiver. Sometimes, the cues take the form of laughter or clapping of hands, or visible boredom, antagonism or frightening silence.

Feedback is a principle which is valid for all forms of church activity, but we are particularly interested in the relation of feedback to preaching. The preacher who learns to apply the feedback principle will discover new meaning in the preaching situation as he and the congregation develop patterns for a dialogical relationship. More

attention will be given to the principle of feedback in the final chapter where the focus will be on lay participation in the preaching event.

3) Retroactive Inhibition. This is a rather complicated term which means simply that communication is blocked because there is too much information. When there is a communication overload, the receiver experiences difficulty assimilating any of the information, and the communication is ineffective. C. David Mortensen refers to this problem under the heading of "channel capacity."¹⁷ He states that "despite its enormous capacity, the human information processing system can do only a few things at a time and can attend to only a small proportion of the available information. There is a clear and definite limit to the amount of information which the human organism can identify accurately."¹⁸

Translated into meaning for the preacher, this principle tells the preacher something about the selection and form of his material, his homiletical style and the pacing of the sermon. A barrage of words is no guarantee that communication has taken place. A congregation generally has an unusual capacity for patience, but few people can tolerate an interminable discourse. The surest way to jeopardize

¹⁷ C. David Mortensen, Communication (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972), p. 83.

¹⁸ Ibid.

the success of the communication process is for the source to send out more information than the receiver is capable of handling. In the preaching event persons are called on to reflect on matters of ultimate significance. Clement Welsh has pointed out that in the sermon we are asking a person "to plunge briefly to the level of first principles and brood there for twenty minutes, and this is one of the most difficult exercises a person can attempt. At the time of the sermon, a person is asked to do an astonishing thing: begin making ultimate sense of everything."¹⁹

This process of making sense of one's universe requires time and reflection. The minister can be helpful in this process if he sees the sermon as a way of sharing reality bit by bit rather than providing all the answers to ultimate questions.

4) Selective Perception. Some attention was given to perception in a previous section of this chapter. Suffice it to say that some form of perceptual organization occurs in our contact with the physical world. We tend to follow certain rules in imposing order on all our perceived experience. Mortensen points out that "the most most basic rule is that an individual organizes in ways which give priority to what is striking...In short, the rules of perception act as a psychological filter, enabling each person to focus on what he

¹⁹ Welsh, p. 30.

considers to be the most strategic aspect of the interaction." ²⁰

Mortensen goes further and gives a clue to the importance of attitudes in perceptual organization:

The central nervous system by and large separates the torrents of incoming signals on the basis of whatever feelings, needs, attitudes, and motives happen to be dominant at the moment. The very existence of an attitudinal framework for perception virtually precludes the possibility that the signals will be separated in an arbitrary or mechanical way...Attitudes, then, enable each observer to respond to whatever features of an environment he regards as pertinent while ignoring or discounting items he views as having little or no import. ²¹

The thrust of this is that people tend to sort out of a message those elements which they wish to hear. Information which is incompatible with the receiver's values and beliefs is rejected. Our inclination is to listen for those elements in a message which are consistent with our way of thinking.

Effective pulpit communication requires that the principle of selective perception be taken seriously. People often complain that the sermon was too intellectual, that it was "over our heads." This complaint is an indication that people were unable to take what the preacher said and organize it in a way that made sense to them. If the preacher has a genuine understanding of his congregation, he will begin with questions which emerge out of their situation and then proclaim the answers which are implied in the Christian gospel.

²⁰ Mortensen, pp. 95 and 99.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 100-101.

The Cultural Context. Another requirement for those who would understand the dynamics of communication is familiarity with the wider culture. In delineating the various models of communication, we have already noted that communication takes place in a larger cultural sphere. Although many people identify culture with certain life styles, it is more accurate to think of culture as the total way of life for a people. It involves all the patterns and ways of behavior by which a people organize their lives. It includes the way people think and act and feel and respond and interact with their environment. One can think of culture as the way in which people respond to existence. In a sense, culture is man's way of survival.²²

As people relate to each other, they establish patterns of relationship, they sing and play games and behave in certain ways. Culture has to do with behavior patterns and the ways people have developed for dealing with their environment. In a real sense, communication is an integral part of life and the way people find to communicate with each other gives us a clue to their culture. This means that culture and communication are bound up together and cannot be separated. Some social scientists make the point that culture is communication, that the totality of man's existence must be

²² Edward T. Hall, The Silent Language (Greenwich, Ct.; Fawcett, 1959), p. 31f.

seen in terms of communication networks.²³

This reading of culture is highly significant for anyone who wishes to communicate effectively. As we experience a shrinking of the universe and people are brought into closer contact with one another, it is more critical than ever to be sensitive to cultural differences. Not only is cross-cultural communication going on between people of different countries, there is also interchange between sub-cultures within the same country. We see this especially with the growing number of ethnic groups in American society. Unless the preacher understands and appreciates the deep differences which reside in various sub-cultures, he can make tremendous blunders in the communication process. As we learned from the global model of communication, the whole environment is charged with communication. The preacher is challenged to respond to this new situation with sensitivity and learn to listen to communications which flow across cultural boundaries.

The Use of Imagination. One distinguished professor of preaching has described the state of contemporary preaching as somewhere between miserable and wretched.²⁴ This can be said not

²³ Ibid., p. 94.

²⁴ K. Morgan Edwards, (paper read to the faculty of the School of Theology at Claremont, California, January 17, 1966).

so much because preaching has had its day, but because of the erosion of imagination in the pulpit. Many people never seriously expect anything to happen when they hear a sermon. The preaching is drab and colorless. Nothing is more important for the recovery of the sermon as a medium of communication than the infusion of imagination into the preaching process.

The artist can help us sense anew the power of the sermon as a vehicle for opening God's grace in human existence. By introducing us to fresh and imaginative ways of expression, the artist can be instructive as we seek the recovery of preaching in our time. Consider, for example, the similarity between poetry and preaching. Many of the theories regarding poetic creation can be applied to the art of preaching. As F. Thomas Trotter has written:

The poet's language is really the language of the vernacular. He simply strives for the precise statement. The poet's experience normally is the community's experience. The artist tells the community, at the risk of its displeasure, the secrets of its own heart. He simply strives for focus and force in communicating that experience in the light of the gospel.²⁵

This is not an encouragement to embellish preaching with flowery language. The poet is concerned with the direct statement--without embellishment--with economy of words and with unmistakable force. For preaching which often becomes moralistic in style or

²⁵ F. Thomas Trotter, taken from an unpublished paper entitled "Imagination and the Recovery of Preaching."

academic in presentation, the poetic utterance offers a healthy model.

What is required is nothing less than a baptism of the imagination so that preaching is marked by vivacity and freshness. As more attention is given to the disciplines of the imagination, such as poetry, the forms of speech used in preaching will be renewed. Poetry is the language of the marketplace, the neighborhood, the ghetto, the police station, the school--wherever human discourse is taking place. And if preaching is to have any power, it must take its language from that kind of earthly traffic.

Jesus' preaching had the quality of poetic utterance. The images he used were pulled from daily life--words such as salt, lamp, grapes, thorns, wineskins, a fish net and a lost coin. His message was delivered in vividly concrete and vigorous language to people on the street corners, fishermen in their boats and to the farmer in the field.

The poet writes out of emotion to arouse emotion. He tries to communicate something deeper than ideas. He sees the function of words to make people believe and do.²⁶ The poet is not primarily concerned with the transmission of information. His words carry powerful feeling and evoke a response in the reader. The lesson for the preacher is that he must find a way of preaching that will enable

²⁶ From a conversation with Ernest Cadman Colwell, May 1968.

the listener to apprehend the reality behind the language used in the sermon. Thus, when the preacher speaks of the experience of God, he must translate this so that persons in the pew actually experience the presence of God. This is why poetic style and utterance are so important. Poetry offers a clue as to how the preacher's language may become a medium for the word of God.

Preaching which is touched with imagination helps the hearers enter the world of new life which the preacher proclaims. As John Killinger put it:

If this is so, it bears important implications for preaching. It means there is a vast difference between preaching and philosophy, or preaching and theology. Philosophy and theology are concerned with ideas, and abstractions--with the geometry of thinking. But preaching must have to do with images. It must appeal to the imagination, and help us to see again. The words of the sermon must become pictures, scenes vivid enough for men to enter, so that a new world happens to them as the preacher speaks.²⁷

²⁷ John Killinger (ed.) The Saving Image (Nashville: Tidings, 1974), p. 11.

CHAPTER V

PREACHING AND HEARING: AN INTEGRATIVE MODEL

THE ISOLATION OF THE MINISTER

The ministry has often been depicted as a lonely profession. Isolated from the common currents of life, the minister frequently feels that he has little to discuss with his parishioners except religious matters. Spending most of his time on sermons, hymns, prayers, and church administrative duties, the clergyman has limited time to spend with his people where they live and work and play. The culture in which we live has contributed to the loneliness of the minister. Society looks at the ministry with certain expectations. The preacher is a "holy man," an authority in spiritual matters, one who is somehow untouched by the weaknesses and frailties of human existence. He is one to whom we go with our problems, but seldom with our friendship. We expect the minister to stand just outside the orbit of ordinary human existence, and he is obliged to fit into that mold. Thus, a chasm is created between the clergy and laity because of societal pressures.

On the other hand, part of the isolation of the minister is the minister's own doing. When he assumes an arrogant posture in the congregation, barriers to communication are immediately erected.

When he moves through the community with an air of pretentiousness, people will find him unreal and deal with him only on peripheral concerns. Only as the minister confesses his own humanity will he be able to share in significant ways with others.

Sometimes the pain of loneliness for the minister is accentuated because he endeavors to carry the whole burden of ministry by himself, a ministry which appropriately belongs to the entire congregation. One of the persistent threats to church renewal is the problem of clericalism, the attitude that the church belongs to professionals. The ministries of the church, including the ministries of preaching, healing, and pastoral care, are not the exclusive prerogatives of the ordained clergy. They are committed to the whole church, and the task of the minister is to provide the kind of leadership which will enable the church to be a ministering community. Seward Hiltner gives clear expression to this central role of the minister:

The minister has one role: he is the leader of a particular section of the Christian community. Though he has many activities, it is his relation to the Christian community which defines his role. The role is not only deeper than the activities: the activities would be quite different in their meaning if they were not based on the role. As the leader of the Christian community, what does the minister try to do? In general, that is not hard to answer. He is concerned with the growth of all within the Christian fellowship itself. He is the leader in developing that growth for children as they come into the church (religious education) and for all members of the fellowship as they come together (worship, preaching religious education). He guides the church as it reaches out to help build and rebuild the community (social outreach). He is the leader of the aid and support the fellowship gives to those who are handicapped, who face temporary obstacles, or who find

unusual difficulties in the growth process (pastoral work and counseling). And he is the leader in the organization necessary to male all this really work (administration). There are many activities but one role; many members but one body. The pastor's task is organic, precisely because it has a variety of functions operating to the same end.¹

While ministers are part of the church, they are not the whole, and it is unfortunate for them personally and for the entire church when ministers fail to sense the importance of the vitality and talents of the laity for the whole Christian enterprise.

THE WHOLE CHURCH AND PROCLAMATION

With the understanding that both clergy and lay persons are summoned to share in the church's mission, we want now to explore the thesis that the whole church is called to participate in the office of proclamation. The sermon is created by the church and the congregation is called to share part of the burden of preaching. The task of proclamation is not a solo performance on the part of the preacher. In fact, the impotence of preaching today stems in part from the effort of the preacher to take the whole burden of sermon preparation on himself. The preacher thus becomes a helpless soloist, attempting to carry on a task which is intended for the Christian community. As Helmut Thielicke expressed it:

¹ Seward Hiltner, Pastoral Counseling (New York: Abingdon Press, 1949), pp. 150-151.

Time and again it has been my personal experience that hardly ever do we arrive at such vital, searching, and yet thematically broad discussions as when we talk over with others a text which is to be the basis of a sermon... To be sure, this should not be merely a matter of discussions with experts and specialists, but rather of consultation with those who will also be the hearers of the sermon and therefore with laymen... To that extent the theological and spiritual exchange with laymen is a healing spring for all the problems we face in preaching.²

In the preaching event, the hearer is as important as the preacher. The communication process requires hearing as well as speaking in order to be complete. Reuel Howe correctly points out that "the hearer has power not only to call forth and enable the speaker, and thus increase the communication, but to minister to the loneliness of the speaker as well."³ Howe goes on to underscore how few congregations realize the significance of their listening for the empowerment and strengthening of the sermon. He writes:

The loneliness of many preachers is an indication that the sermon is monological and that the preacher is not met by a congregation which knows itself as a partner in the act of communication. The hearer, by demonstrating that he hears and understands the speaker, meets him in the risk of communication. Such a hearer ministers to the loneliness of the communicator and joins him again to the human race.⁴

Preaching can be delivered from sterility if it is moved once

² Helmut Thielicke, The Trouble with the Church (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), p. 25.

³ Reuel L. Howe, The Miracle of Dialogue (Greenwich, Ct.: Seabury Press, 1963), p. 74.

⁴ Ibid., p. 75.

again into the arena from which it springs--the whole Church of God. Vital preaching is not likely to happen as long as preachers and laypersons talk past each other, as long as they are unable to enter each other's world. Both clergy and laity need to understand that the one great preacher in history, as P. T. Forsyth contends, is the Church.⁵ The primary function of the individual preacher is to enable the Church to preach. As Forsyth put it, "He is to preach to the Church from the Gospel so that with the Church he may preach the Gospel to the world."⁶

Dietrich Ritschl is one of the most articulate spokesmen for the position that the whole church is called to participate in the office of proclamation. In his view, this office is held by Jesus Christ alone and all the members of the church participate in Christ's office of self-proclamation. Ritschl writes:

A preacher as a single individual cannot usurp this gift for himself by claiming that he and he alone can exegete the Bible. The authority of Christ's presence is a gift given to the whole Church. This gift demands the response of prayer and obedience of all the members of the church. The simple 'technique' of preaching an expository sermon does not force Christ to be present or to authorize the word of the preacher. The whole congregation stands in the vicariate, or 'succession,' as Karl Barth calls it, which is not a succession of offices or qualities, but a succession of the proclamation, which can only happen because of the presence of

⁵ P. T. Forsyth, Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), p. 53.

⁶ Ibid.

the risen Lord in the Church. The Word rules over the Church and the Church is called to hear, accept and proclaim it; it can never be inverted so that the Church rules over the Word.⁷

It is clear that Ritschl has a high view of preaching which sees the sermon as an event in and out of the church; preaching is not merely a way of repeating biblical passages without reference to those who listen. In Ritschl's view, "the sermon is an act of God the Father in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit... Human witness is participation in this action of Jesus Christ. It is, strictly speaking, participation in revelation."⁸ Ritschl's study gives primary attention to basic biblical and dogmatical questions with which the preacher must wrestle as he considers responsible communication of the gospel. The question is not so much on how to preach, but why the church is called to preach and what is actually taking place in the preaching event. The sermon, according to Ritschl, is not a reflection, an evaluation, a memorial, an instruction, or a mere repetition of the words of the Bible. "God wants the sermon to be His own living voice."⁹

This high conception of the sermon can take form in the church only as the minister and the congregation join together in the preach-

⁷ Dietrich Ritschl, A Theology of Proclamation (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1960), pp. 68-69.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 45-46.

⁹ Ibid., p. 32.

ing task. Since the whole church has the office of proclamation, there must be a conscious effort on the part of the minister and congregation to develop a real brotherhood of the preaching and hearing of the Word. The gift of proclamation is given to the whole church for its service to the world.

The Biblical Foundation

The biblical tradition gives support to the thesis that the whole church is called to share in the proclamation of the gospel. We are concerned here with the nature of the church as it is pictured in the New Testament. In the biblical understanding, the church is the people of God. This is made quite explicit in the first letter of Peter: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy."

(I Peter 2: 9-10)

Ecclesia. As the people of God the church has received God's mercy and is sent forth into the world to proclaim God's action in Christ. The word which we apply to this people of God is the word "church." But the English word "church" is a derivative of the Greek word "kyriakon" which means "that which belongs to the Lord."

"Church" is used also as the translation of the Greek word "ecclesia."

This word appears some one hundred and fifteen times in the New Testament and is closely related to the idea of "that which belongs to the Lord." In ordinary Greek usage, "ecclesia" referred to most any gathering of persons who had been summoned for a specific purpose. In the New Testament, however, we find that this word has been invested with a special meaning. "Ecclesia" does have a parallel in the Greek translation to the Old Testament, where it signifies the congregation of the Israelites gathered for religious purposes.¹⁰ In this sense, the Israelites were a special community called out by God, and thereby constituting the church of God. The word "ecclesia" was taken into the Christian vocabulary as Christians made the claim that they were the true "people of God," people who belonged to God for a special mission.

In the New Testament, particularly in the Book of Acts and the Pauline epistles, the word "church" is used in a variety of ways.¹¹

(a) the church universal, to which all believers belong, as in Acts 9:31, "So the church throughout all Judea and Gallilee and Samaria had peace and was built up..." (b) the church or congregation as the totality of Christians living in one place, as seen in Acts 8:1, "and on that day a

¹⁰ Wilbur F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 240.

¹¹ Ibid.

great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem..." (c) people coming together in a church meeting, as reflected in I Corinthians 11:18, "For, in the first place, when you assemble as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you; and I partly believe it." (d) reference to house churches, as in Romans 16:5, "Greet also the church in their house."

In all the various ways of looking at the church in the New Testament, it is significant to note that people came together not as a voluntary collection of individuals for mutual edification. They were called together by God who had acted in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Christians were summoned together as the new people of God because of their response to Jesus and their commitment to witness in His name. We must see the church not only as a human community but also as the people of God. As Claude Welch expressed it:

For it is equally clear in the New Testament that this human community is wholly dependent on God. It is his creation, his act. We are brethren because we "share in a heavenly call." (Hebrews 3:1)...All that we can say, then, about the genuine sociality and historicity of the common life of the church must refer also and primarily to the working of God. It is by the grace of Christ that the church is upheld. Apart from the faithfulness of God in Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the church could not be or continue to be the church.¹²

¹² Claude Welch, The Reality of the Church (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 65.

Koinonia. Another concept which helps us understand the quality of the church's life is expressed in the Greek word "koinonia." This word occurs some 20 times in the New Testament, and in most instances it is translated "fellowship."¹³ There is need to reclaim this word "fellowship" and invest it with the rich meaning it had in the early Christian community. Koinonia means communion, fellowship, close relationship or association. It has to do with a sense of fellow-feeling and generosity. The most appropriate meaning, however, is a common participation or sharing in something with someone else.¹⁴ The words which cluster around "koinonia" are mutual concern, sharing, togetherness, and participation. We first encounter this word in Acts 2:42, "and they devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching and (the) fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." The definite article in Greek is left out in some translations, but it should be included, for it indicates that the Christian fellowship is a particular kind of sharing and participation. In the fellowship of the spirit, Christians were bound to one another in a relationship of mutual caring and sharing. The most distinctive thing about this fellowship, however, was that it evolved out of

¹³ James Hastings (ed.) Dictionary of the Bible (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1963), p. 295.

¹⁴ Arndt and Gingrich, p. 440.

fellowship with Jesus Christ and participation in the life of the spirit. In the New Testament, the word "fellowship" expresses a vertical-horizontal relationship. There are cases where the word gives expression to a more exalted partnership, the partnership of a Christian with Christ or God. We find this, for example, when Paul speaks of the koinonia of Christ's sufferings. (Philippians 3:10) Or, when St. John writes, "Our fellowship is with the Father and with His son, Jesus Christ." (I John 1:3) John goes further in making our fellowship with one another dependent on our fellowship with God: "But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, His son, cleanses us from all sin." (I John 1:7) Even on this exalted level, fellowship still retains its essential meaning as a mutual sharing, a reciprocal giving and receiving. Essentially, then, the Christian fellowship is sharing with others the new life which has come through faith in the risen Lord. Christian fellowship involves relating to one another as God has related Himself to us. It is nothing less than the shared life of God in the community of those who are called to be the people of God. "The inescapable conclusion," contends Howard Grimes, "is that the New Testament concept of koinonia implies more than mere human association. It involves participation in something which is held in

¹⁵ Howard Grimes, The Church Redemptive (New York: Abingdon Press, 1958), p. 53.

common, that common reality being the Spirit that was in Christ Jesus and that is still available through the Holy Spirit."¹⁵

The Church's Corporate Nature

The testimony of the New Testament is overwhelmingly on the side of the corporate nature of the church. Through the Spirit we are not only joined with Christ, but we are also united in a new way with others who have confessed the name of Jesus. Calvin summarizes the dimensions of this new relationship:

"...that none of the brethren can be injured, despised, rejected, abused, or in any way offended by us without at the same time, injuring, despising, and abusing Christ by the wrongs we do; that we cannot disagree with our brethren without at the same time disagreeing with Christ; that we cannot love Christ without loving Him in the brethren; that we ought to take the same care of our brethren's bodies as we take of our own; for they are members of our body..."¹⁶

Christ left behind a community of people. To think of the Christian life apart from the people of God is an impossibility. The Church is a living organism, receiving its vitality and empowerment from the Spirit of Christ. On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was given not to isolated individuals but to a worshipping community. The possession of the Spirit and membership in the church went hand in hand. There was a correlation between the vitality of the whole

¹⁶ Jean Calvin, "The Lord's Supper Implies Mutual Love," in his Institutes of the Christian Religion (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), II, 1415.

fellowship of believers and the gift of the Spirit to individual members.

The Apostle Paul's image of the church as the Body of Christ is a clear statement on the importance of the corporate life of the church. This image is presented in some detail in Paul's letters to the churches in Corinth and Rome: "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many." (I Corinthians 12:12-14) "For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another." (Romans 12:4-5)

Through the use of this image, Paul makes the case for the organic unity of the church. Each member has an indispensable function without which the whole body cannot function properly. There are no unnecessary members of the Christian fellowship. Every member of the community needs the help and support of every other member. Those members who on the surface seem less important than the rest need to be approached with particular respect. The pain or misfortune of one member should be felt by all the members. There is opportunity in the church for all members to use their particular gifts. Each person is to be honored for his unique contri-

bution, for the gifts of one member may complement the gifts of another.

The church, then, is a fellowship in which those who are united with Christ are united with one another. It is a living organism from which each member draws his life and is sustained.

This is the community which is called by God to be His people, to participate in His Spirit, and to embody and declare His word.

RECOVERY OF COMMUNAL ASPECT OF MINISTRY

The biblical understanding of the church makes it imperative that we recover the communal aspect of our life together. The sharp dichotomy between clergy and laity, the prominence given one function of ministry as over against another, tears the fabric of Christian community and weakens its witness to the world. The church is mission and all Christians are called to be engaged in the total task of ministry. The United Methodist Church has tried to give expression to this concept in the Book of Discipline:

Ministry in the Christian church is derived from the ministry of Christ, the ministry of the Father through the Incarnate Son by the Holy Spirit. It is a ministry bestowed upon and required of the entire church. All Christians are called to ministry, and theirs is a ministry of the people of God within the community of faith and in the world. Members of the United Methodist Church receive this gift of ministry in company with all Christians and sincerely hope to continue and extend it in the world for which Christ lived, died, and lives again. The United Methodist Church believes that

Baptism, confirmation, and responsible membership in the church are visible signs of acceptance of this ministry.¹⁷

The Book of Discipline goes further in defining the meaning of church membership:

Faithful participation in the corporate life of the congregation is an obligation of the Christian to his fellow members of the Body of Christ. A member is bound in sacred covenant to shoulder the burdens, share the risks, and celebrate the joys of his fellow members.¹⁸

The point which these statements make is that the ministry in the church is the whole ministry of the whole people of the whole church. The professional ministry is located within the whole ministry of the church. Without a fundamental appreciation for the corporate life of the church the ordained ministry loses its integrity. It is the church that ordains a person for ministry, and such a person is affirmed and his service enhanced by the community in which he participates. Ordination is thus a corporate act which is designed to serve corporate life. Henry Sloan Coffin was undoubtedly thinking along these lines when he said, "The minister is nothing apart from the church. It is not his ministry that is of first importance, but the church's ministry which he leads."¹⁹ Taking a more unorthodox

¹⁷ The Book of Discipline of the United Methodist Church (Nashville: Methodist Publishing House, 1968), pp. 106-107.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 69.

¹⁹ Henry Sloan Coffin, In a Day of Social Rebuilding (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1918), pp. 192-193.

stance, J. C. Hoekendijk views the laity as the "bearers of the apostolate."²⁰ A church that takes the apostolate seriously gives attention to preparing "the members of God's mission people" for their service. As the bearer of the apostolate, the congregation, clergy and laity together, "will have to make the word and thus also the apostolate credible through her existence and life, through word and deed."²¹ In commenting on the distinction between clergy and laity, Hoekendijk points out that their roles or offices are different. However, he goes on to say that "it is of the essence that the offices, which we see functioning in great diversity, be relativized as a matter of principle. They are brought into a serving relationship to the constitutive office of Jesus Christ and the lay ministry of the congregation... The offices are a gracious surplus. It is not more than the explanatory footnote at the bottom of the gospel text..."²² From this perspective, the primary function of the ordained ministry is to "equip the saints for the work of the ministry." (Ephesians 4: 12)

²⁰ J. C. Hoekendijk, The Church Inside Out (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964), p. 85.

²¹ Ibid., p. 66.

²² Ibid., pp 102-103.

TOWARD A NEW DEFINITION OF PREACHING

If ministry is no longer limited to the professional clergy, and if we now envision the whole congregation as having responsibility for witnessing to the gospel, then we are driven toward a definition of preaching which is more consistent with the present concept of ministry. The task of preparing and delivery sermons takes place in the setting of the Christian church. Christians increasingly realize that the church is not merely a building at the corner "of First and Main Streets," but a fellowship which gives testimony to the gospel of Christ in the world. We have already seen that the church is a mutually nurturing community and this has momentous consequence for preaching. The proclamation of the gospel of Christ is not a special province for professionals only but one in which every Christian is called to participate. Too often this insight has been eroded by the assumption that the preaching task belong exclusively to the clergy. The preaching ministry is one which is done by the professional minister and the worshipping congregation.

In the concept of the corporate nature of the church's life, Thor Hall has put forth a definition of preaching which merits consideration:

Preaching is a communal event--community based and community creating. It is not as if a foreign word somehow revealed itself to a single individual--the preacher--and he were charged with the responsibility of gaining attention for it, impressing people with it, and winning acceptance of it. The Word that is preached is the

is the story in which the church already has its existence; the preacher simply gives utterance to the church's consciousness of the gospel. Preaching is a vicarious and representative ministry--a function one member of the community assumes on behalf of the entire church... The ministry of preaching is a function of the apostolate, of the entire laos; the preacher's task is to facilitate a steadily deepening awareness of the meaning of the gospel in the present.²³

In a profound sense, in the preaching of the gospel all the members of the congregation are sharing the life-giving word with one another. Preaching is an event through which members of the church offer themselves to God in renewed commitment and to one another in mutual encouragement and caring. Martin Luther, in one of his sermons, expresses this concept of preaching with unusual vividness:

For when I preach, when we come together as a congregation, this is not my word or my doing, but is done for the sake of all of you and for the sake of the whole church. It is only that it is necessary that there be one who speaks and is the spokesman by the commission and consent of the others, who, by reason of the fact that they listen to the preaching, all accept and confess the Word and thus also teach others. Thus, when a child is baptized, this is done not only by the pastor, but also the sponsors who are witnesses, indeed, the whole church. For baptism, just like the Word and Christ himself, is the common possession of all Christians. So also they all pray and sing and give thanks together; here there is nothing that one possesses or does for himself alone; but what each one has also belongs to the other.²⁴

²³ Thor Hall, The Future Shape of Preaching (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), p. 109.

²⁴ Martin Luther, "Sermon at the Dedication of the Castle Church in Torgan, October 5, 1544," in his Works, (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1959), LI, 343.

The recovery of preaching as a communal activity can bring a new dimension of power and effectiveness to the church's proclamation. Where the minister and laity share together in the task of preaching, the role of the minister is enhanced rather than diminished. No longer isolated as the prima donna who is expected to give a performance on Sunday, the minister can now experience that remarkable freedom and buoyancy which is the gift of a shared ministry. Preaching becomes more significant as that activity by which members of the church minister to one another and which calls them out to embody the gospel at the various interfaces of human existence.

To the extent that sermons grow out of a congregation's engagement with the gospel, they are able to touch the contours of individual as well as social existence. Sermons which have their roots at that point where the life of the congregation intersects with the claims and promises of the gospel--such sermons gather up the needs and hopes of the people, help them see their lives in larger meanings and enable them to go forth as the people of God, bearing witness to that which they have heard and seen.

PREACHING AS A COMMUNAL EVENT: IMPLICATIONS

Understanding preaching as a communal event has enormous impact on the way a church envisions and carries out its ministry. The final part of this chapter will deal with the implications of this

Preaching in the Context of the Worship Event

P. T. Forsyth once described preaching as "the organized Hallelujah of an ordered community."²⁵ If this is to be true, then preaching will have to be seen as an integral part of the worship experience. Far too often, the various facets of the liturgy are viewed as preliminaries to be dispensed with as quickly as possible so that the preacher can get on with the sermon. This attitude which makes the sermon the main attraction and denigrates the rest of the liturgy has no credence when preaching is central to the life of the Christian community. It has all the movement of drama and is the primary way in which we rehearse God's gift in Christ and offer ourselves in response to the overtures of God's love. Through a pattern of adoration, confession, thanksgiving and commitment, we discover anew the meanings which shape our lives. True preaching fits into the totality of this celebration and becomes the point where that Word which was revealed in Christ is spoken again. As P. T. Forsyth said, "To be effective our preaching must be sacramental. It must be an act prolonging the Great Act, mediating it and conveying it. Its energy and authority is that of the Great Act. The gospel spoken by man

²⁵ Forsyth, p. 64.

is the energizing of the gospel achieved by God." ²⁶

All the richness of Christian history stands back of the sermon when it is seen as an integral element in the pattern of worship. For the preacher is faithful to his calling not when he things of the sermon as a time to voice his own private opinions, but to sound that word which has been part of the church's tradition and which informs and inspires Christian discipleship. Colin Morris has stated this truth in poetic style:

The preacher can only preach beyond his own experience when he is preaching out of the church's. And what a rich tapestry can be woven from the history of the universal church! Could anything befall mortal man that the church has not known? Bane and blessing, pain and pleasure, glory and defeat, humiliation and vindication, betrayal and forgiveness--the church has lived through the totality of human experience. So the preacher's 'we' is neither editorial nor royal; it is confessional. ²⁷

All that God has made known through the church becomes a resource for the preaching event. The preacher is not a solo performer. He stands in the midst of a people who have access to history, and through whom the promises of God are being fulfilled. This is the conviction that empowers preaching and saves it from the tyranny of the peripheral. To quote Colin Morris again:

²⁶ Ibid., p. 57.

²⁷ Colin Morris, The Word and the Words (London: Epworth Press, 1975), p. 30.

So behind the preacher's word is all the power of corporate conviction, the assurance of corporate faith and the impact of a corporate will. These are a few of the riches the church offers the preacher.²⁸

Preaching which is informed by the whole church, which fits appropriately into the landscape of the total worship service, can be a true and lively word, exercising a dominant influence on the renewal of worship. This goes deeper than changes in homiletical style or reforms in the liturgy. It has to do with the interaction between the preacher and the congregation as they seek to offer their worship in service to God. Preaching becomes a voicing together of those realities which spring from our faith in God and guide our lives into the future. For preaching to maintain its integrity it has to be conceived as a part of the ongoing worship of the church. This concern has been articulated by Paul Hoon:

A common if graver error consists of the style of verbal monologue in which the clergy dominate worship, and the corresponding passivity of the congregation. Important theological and psychological issues begin to arise here, such as the conception of worship as an expression of the priesthood of the people, as a celebrative action in which all participate, and as the involvement of man's whole being... Worship understood as something done rather than something watched, as dialogue between the people of God rather than one-way speech by the leader of the congregation, as involving all man's faculties rather than just his auditory sense--this is vital and this is what is frequently missing.²⁹

²⁸ Ibid., p. 37.

²⁹ Paul W. Hoon, The Integrity of Worship (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), pp. 39-40.

Rather than a one person performance, preaching is an act of worship and this is what gives it a distinctive character. It is the context of worship which makes preaching something other than a speech given at the civic club. It is in the presence of a worshipping community that the sermon deals with adoration, thanksgiving, confession and dedication. Preaching has its source in a common faith and it "leads believing hearers...to say 'Amen.' This 'Amen' means: You have said what I know to be true, although perhaps I could not have said it. You have pointed to the realities in my own experience as a participant in the life of the church. You are speaking to me, but more profoundly, for me. You are confessing my faith." ³⁰

New Patterns of Relationship Between Minister and Congregation

A second meaning or implication flowing out of the definition of preaching as a communal event is the sense of partnership between pastor and congregation. In the routine structures of church life, the minister and congregation often talk past each other. They encounter each other in their formal roles, but it is a rare experience when the communication barriers are broken down, allowing them to enter each other's existence. Dialogue is an ever-present need in the pastor-

³⁰ John Knox, The Integrity of Preaching (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), p. 80.

church relationship. "Experiencing the other side" is the way Martin Buber characterizes the dialogical relationship.³¹ It signifies an openness to the meanings of another, a sensitivity to the way in which the other person experiences a particular event. Buber expands on this idea by developing the "principle of inclusion," which means that quality of including the meanings of others when we address them, that alertness to their questions, doubts and affirmations.³² Reuel Howe defines dialogue as

that address and response between persons in which there is a flow of meaning between them in spite of all the obstacles that normally would block the relationship. It is that interaction between persons in which one of them seeks to give himself as he is to the other, and seeks also to know the other as the other is. This means that he will not attempt to impose his own truth and view on the other. Such is the relationship which characterizes dialogue, and is the precondition to dialogical communication.³³

Confessional Preaching. Preaching as a communal activity fosters a meeting of meanings between the minister and congregation, and they discover the excitement of sharing together in the proclamation of the gospel. In this context, laypersons sense that the gospel is vitally related to the stuff of their existence, that the actual

³¹ Martin Buber, Between Man and Man (New York: Macmillan, 1965), p. 96.

³² Ibid., p. 97.

³³ Howe, p. 37.

situation of their lives becomes part of the preaching event. The preacher's loneliness is overcome as he shares the yearnings of his own spirit and feels as one with the congregation in the confession of sin and the acceptance of God's forgiveness. God's spirit makes an invasion into our lives through human relationships. In a classic statement concerning this, Herbert H. Farmer contends "that preaching is only to be rightly understood and conducted when it is seen in the context of a Christian understanding of persons and their relationships with one another. It is first, last and all the time a function of the personal world."³⁴ To quote Farmer again on the significance of personal relationships:

I begin with the proposition that God's purpose is such, and He has so made humanity in accordance with that purpose, that He never enters into personal relationship with a man apart from other human persons. When He confronts me in the specific personal I-Thou relationship, it is always closely bound up with the personal I-Thou relationship I have with my fellows. I am related to the personal God in the neighbor, to the neighbor as personal in God.³⁵

For the pastor and the congregation, preaching becomes a way of calling each other into existence. This requires personal encounter between the preacher and his people. The preacher is in the midst of the congregation not as a clerical promoter or to impress

³⁴ Herbert H. Farmer, The Servant of the Word (London: Nisbet, 1946), p. 36.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 37.

them with his eloquent style or parade his knowledge; he is there to share his personal experience and commitment with other persons. The congregation and pastor are present to each other, and in this relationship, they celebrate God's grace in their lives, yield themselves to God's justment and go forth in newness of life as servants of the gospel.

In the words of Paul Tillich, "Communication is a matter of participation. Where there is no participation, there is no communication."³⁶ In few situations does this principle stand out with such clarity as it does in the relationship between a minister and the congregation. As they share in each other's existence, communication becomes not merely a catchword, but a reality linking minister and people together in a bond of relationship which is most understandable in that redemptive fellowship called the church.

Preaching and Pastoral Care. These concerns can hardly be dealt with apart from the realization that the functions of preaching and pastoral care are vitally related. Preaching, regardless of its theological formulation or structural preciseness, is little more than a noisy gong unless it does business with the bruises and hurts of people in life's traffic. To be real, a sermon requires more than

³⁶ Paul Tillich, Theology of Culture (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 204.

thirty hours of preparation in a private study which is decorated in impeccable style. The sermon must throb with the joys and sorrows, the gains and losses of the congregation. This happens only as the preacher on Sunday makes himself available during the week, listening to the warm longings or terrifying anxieties of his parish, locating himself in their world and feeling the pressures that are part of their daily discourse with life. A sermon may be neatly packaged, but it will fall flat unless it is drenched in living experiences which come out of a pastor's vulnerability to the needs of his congregation. Simply put, the preacher is called to love and deeply care for the people of his parish. Seward Hiltner has given clear expression to this idea:

To put the matter in more comprehensive terms, the way in which one testifies to the gospel cannot be determined in advance by the preferences of the testifier. Testimony must be given according to the need and condition, on any particular occasion. One cannot say, "I have a single secure way of testifying to my faith on all occasions and do not have to take into account the relativities of human need." Instead, testimony to Christian faith is always a compound of the eternal gospel and specific need. Any attempt to wrap the gospel in a cellophane package, as if it could be given in the same way on all occasions, betrays what is required. The mode of testimony should be according to the need in the situation.³⁷

Preaching and pastoral care, then, are interdependent and each needs the other to be effective. No person can preach well over a

³⁷ Seward Hiltner, The Christian Shepherd (New York: Abingdon Press, 1959), pp. 17-18.

period of time who is not compassionately related to the real needs of the congregation. On the other hand, pastoral care loses something of its informed sensitivity if the minister glides along on the periphery of things and fails to devote himself enthusiastically to the task of preaching. "The work of the preacher and the pastor," said Phillips Brooks, "really belong together, and ought not to be separated."³⁸ Brooks put it like this:

The preacher needs to be pastor, that he may preach to real men. The pastor must be preacher, that he may keep the dignity of his work alive. The preacher, who is not a pastor, grows remote. The pastor, who is not a preacher, grows petty. Never be content to let men truthfully say of you, "He is a preacher, but no pastor," or, "He is a pastor but no preacher." Be both; for you cannot really be one unless you are also the other.³⁹

Congregational Participation in the Sermon

Brotherhood of the Word. Another implication of looking at preaching as a communal event is the partnership which develops between the pastor and congregation in the creation of the sermon. In a previous chapter, reference was made to Dietrich Ritschl's position that the whole church was called to participate in the office of proclamation. He contends that the congregation inflicts a terrible

³⁸ Phillips Brooks, Lectures on Preaching (New York: Dutton, 1877), pp. 75-77.

³⁹ Ibid.

cruelty on the minister when it lays on him the entire burden of preaching. The word which is preached is not merely the message of an ordained person, but the word of the whole church. The burden and joy of sermon preparation is to be shared by the minister and congregation. Against this background, Ritschl says that the sermon text grows out of the relationship between the preacher and congregation.⁴⁰ As the preacher shares his own study with his people, his weaknesses will become apparent and he will not be thought of as a celebrated preacher and theologian in any superficial sense of the word. "But he will be a good theologian," says Ritschl, "when he shares his questions and answers with his people and when he receives new questions and answers from them. This situation is the beginning of real brotherhood under the Word."⁴¹

The matter of sermon preparation is set within the context of the corporate ministry of the church. The corporate studying and hearing of the Word is indispensable for effective proclamation of the gospel.

Sermon Seminar. Building on Ritschl's concept and re-examining the corporate nature of the church in the New Testament, many churches have begun to experiment with congregational participation

⁴⁰ Ritschl, p. 154.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 155.

in preaching. One of the most notable examples is First Congregational Church in Berkeley, California, where Dr. Browne Barr is senior minister. In consideration of the reinvigoration of old forms in relation to preaching, Barr maintains that "the ministry of the church is the ministry of the whole church, of the entire people of God, not the ministry of the ordained clergy."⁴² The function of preaching belongs to the entire church and not to one person. Using this idea as a launching pad, Barr has experimented with a "sermon seminar." He describes the process by which the seminar gets underway:

Each Sunday's calendar carries the announcement of the text for the following Sunday or the lesson which the sermon will seek to open up--'expose.' Then on Wednesday nights, the entire congregation is invited to come to the church for a sermon seminar at 8:15 p.m. and the minister who is to preach on the following Sunday does a brief nontechnical exegesis of the passage... The effort is to try to make as clear as possible the meaning and intent of the biblical writer... Following the exegesis the seminar is divided into four or five groups of ten each for forty minutes of discussion of the passage... The groups are urged to follow the lead of scripture, but to remember their own problems and questions of faith and life... The preacher tries to listen and speaks only rarely. It is here that the congregation begins to prepare the sermon; but in the process witnessing and confession and doubting and support have taken place... At 9:10 the groups reassemble in the larger seminar for a sentence or two of report and fifteen minutes of prayer."⁴³

⁴² Browne Barr, Parish Back Talk (New York: Abingdon Press, 1964), p. 66.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 76-77.

The result of such a seminar is that the preacher is often led where he had no idea he might go. When the congregation gathers to respond to the scripture, the minister finds it unnecessary to go out hunting for relevant illustrations. Sometimes parishioners will call during the week with a reaction to next Sunday's announced scripture. Occasionally, a participant in the sermon seminar will write his personal response to the scripture, telling how it speaks to the situation in his own life. What happens through all this is that the preacher takes the congregational response seriously in sermon preparation.

Mary Eakin, associate minister at the Berkeley church, has given further insight into the "sermon seminar." ⁴⁴ She indicates that participation decreased during the third year, and the decision was made to try a different approach. So the seminar "took to the road" for a season, meeting at different times and places. One seminar met on a weekly basis in San Francisco during the lunch hour in order to accommodate business and professional persons. Another series was scheduled for mid-mornings in a Berkeley home. The practice of moving the seminar around entailed some risk, but it had the advantage of enlarging the scope and interest, and enabled the

⁴⁴ Browne Barr and Mary Eakin, The Ministering Congregation (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1972), pp. 79-81.

ministers to meet with men and women from various occupations in the study of scripture.

During the Lenten period, the number of participants in the sermon seminar increases significantly. By scheduling fifteen minutes of radio time, the minister is able to reach church members gathered in the neighborhood groups. The groups follow the exegesis of scripture given by the minister and then the seminar continues with capable leaders facilitating the discussion. The leaders are responsible to inform the minister of insights which come out of the seminar. "A constant element," says Mary Eakin, "is the responsible involvement of the people of God with the Word of God. Through such encounter the Word becomes the enlightener and the enabler in the lives of men and women as they face their daily tasks and their mission in and to the world."⁴⁵ As Browne Barr sums it up:

If preaching be only the words of one man, however devout and loyal and brave, Christianity cannot stand or fall on that, for even the best man is finite and corrupt... Yet if preaching be the corporate act of the whole church, unfolding the words of the scriptures so that the Word in scripture is reenacted and prolonged into our history... then it is not sacrilege to speak of 'our services' and to count on immeasurable benefits streaming from them to us and through us... If preaching be not simply the words of one man, but a continuation of the witness of the whole church... then this one act ties together in one single harmony our coming together and our going out... This is to claim that preaching is not a religious talk but the primary and central human instrument which God employs for his divine invasion of our corporate existence."⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 82.

⁴⁶ Barr, Parish Back Talk, pp. 85-86.

Through the sermon seminar the preacher, if he is a sensitive listener, becomes aware of the realistic pressures and problems facing his people. Members of the congregation gain in their understanding of the Bible and how its message enters every corner of their existence. They have a sharpened sense of what it means to belong to a supportive and redemptive fellowship. They come to the Sunday worship service with a new eagerness to hear the sermon, for they have been deeply involved in its creation. Reuel Howe has reminded us that one of the minister's strategic roles is to train laity for their part in the church's proclamation. He writes, "the education of the laity for their part in the ministry of the church, including the ministry of preaching, is every bit as important as the education of clergy, for without a trained laity, skillfully obedient to their ministry in the world, the ministry of the clergy is vain indeed."⁴⁷ This kind of educational program for the laity should not be tangential but central to the church's activity. Lay persons listen to an extraordinary number of sermons, but they seldom have the opportunity to discuss the task of preaching, to consider the nature of the church's proclamation, or to reflect on what is expected when the Word is preached. Church going has often become habitual, listening to

⁴⁷ Reuel L. Howe, Partners in Preaching (New York: Seabury Press, 1967), p. 94.

sermons a routine exercise and complimenting the preacher a customary gesture. But any serious reflection on what is supposed to take place at eleven o'clock on Sunday occurs frequently. Through appropriate training and orientation, laypersons will become increasingly sensitive to their responsibility for the task of preaching.

Dialogue Preaching. Another form of congregational participation in the sermon has been identified as "dialogue preaching." Since the findings of communication theory began to influence the communication task of the church, a plethora of books have been published suggesting the meaning of this research for contemporary preaching.⁴⁸ It is beyond the scope of this study to cover material related to dialogical preaching which has been dealt with quite extensively in other publications. It is important, however, to emphasize that dialogue preaching is participatory by its very definition. Thus, preaching is a cooperative effort involving both pastor and congregation. Proclamation is an activity of the whole community of faith. As Reuel Howe has written, laypersons should be involved in the

⁴⁸ Howe, Partners in Preaching; Clyde Reid, The Empty Pulpit (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); William D. Thompson and Gordon C. Bennett, Dialogue Preaching (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1969); William D. Thompson, A Listener's Guide to Preaching (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1966); William L. Malcomson, The Preaching Event (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968); Merrill R. Abbey, Communication in Pulpit and Parish (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973).

church's preaching because they belong to the church, because the experiences of their lives become part of stuff out of which sermons are made, and because God makes his approach to persons through other persons.⁴⁹ In this understanding, the act of preaching embraces that communication which occurs between the minister and congregation, as well as the interaction which takes place between members of the congregation and the wider community.

Dialogue preaching has been experimented with in a variety of ways, but essentially it takes the form of chancel dialogue or congregational dialogue, or a combination of both. In chancel dialogue, two or more persons, in the presence of the congregation, talk with each other about the text announced for the day. This heightens congregational attention, for they tend to identify with the position of one speaker or the other and feel more involvement in the presentation. Congregational dialogue is more consistent with the corporate nature of the church. This allows members of the congregation to be more directly and intimately involved in shaping the sermon and responding to the proclamation with questions or affirmations.

Regardless of the type used, the significant thing about dialogue preaching is that it gives the congregation a way to respond. It provides the context in which they can bring the concerns and meanings

⁴⁹ Howe, Partners in Preaching, p. 43.

of their own lives. As the sermon develops, it includes not just what the preacher says but all that the congregation brings to the preaching event. If preaching is to be an effective instrument of communicating the gospel, there needs to be an opportunity for the congregation to respond.

The demands on preaching today have undoubtedly been influenced by the electronic revolution. One of the problems with preaching is that it has been a "high definition" medium.⁵⁰ That is to say, preaching has taken the form of a monological presentation with little or no participation on the part of the hearers. In Marshall McLuhan's terminology, a medium can be characterized as "hot" or "cool."⁵¹ Television, for example, is a cool medium, or a medium of low definition, and has the effect of inviting audience participation and commitment. In contrast to this, preaching has been a "hot" medium, through which people have been told what to believe and how to act, with little demand for the imagination and involvement of the congregation. The medium of television involves the viewer and makes him part of the action. The bane of much of contemporary preaching is that it leaves the audience in a detached and uninvolved position, with the effect that the congregation goes away feeling that

⁵⁰ Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 22.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 22-23.

the congregation goes away feeling that nothing significant happened in the worship service. The integrity of preaching requires that the congregation become a part of the preaching act.

"A sermon," wrote James T. Cleland, "is the combined effort of cleric and layman, the mutual enterprise of the beloved community, the harmonious battery of pulpit and pew, for communication is possible only when pulpit and pew are aware that each depends on the other --consciously, cooperatively, continually." ⁵² Some churches have discovered that one creative way to assure this mutuality in the creation of the sermon is the development of a process which allows feedback on the sermon. This discussion, which takes the form of a "talkback," allows for clarification and has the distinct advantage of drawing on the experiences of the congregation. Through this kind of sharing experience, the saving word of the gospel often comes to persons in ways they had never known before. This encounter of the pastor and his people with the sermon has values that go far beyond checking on mannerisms or distracting patterns of speech. The most important element is that it draws the pastor and his people together in the preaching of the Word.

Preachers do well to remember what James F. White has

⁵² James T. Cleland, Preaching To Be Understood (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965), pp. 120 and 126.

expressed: "A sermon is between people. There is no sermon if it is not heard. Words, yes, and gestures aplenty, but no sermon unless there are both preacher and hearer. A sermon is always a social event because it relates people to one another. Effective preaching is always based on this realization. The preacher develops a listener psychology. He is hearing with his congregation as well as speaking to them."⁵³

It is inconceivable that the church can fulfill its ministry without the preaching of the Word. The church can only suffer if there is a demise of interest in the task of proclamation. Preaching will be a vital part of the church's future. It will be seen, however, not as an isolated event, but as a communal activity in which both the preacher and congregation share the burden and the joy of the sermon. The future of preaching lies in the direction of recovering the communal aspect of proclaiming the gospel. Only in this sense will preaching break through the ordinary surface of our lives and become "the organized Hallelujah of an ordered community."⁵⁴

⁵³ James F. White, New Forms of Worship (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), pp. 177-178.

⁵⁴ P. T. Forsyth, p. 64.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY

The chapters of this dissertation have taken shape around the affirmation that the gospel is not being preached because it is not being heard. The dissertation focuses on the significance of hearing as an integral aspect of preaching. The perspective of the hearer is brought to bear on the office of proclamation. Both the biblical tradition and modern communication theory provided insights for developing a concept of preaching that devoted as much seriousness to the word that is heard as the word that is spoken. There is a fundamental correlation between speaking and hearing. In a profound sense, they enable each other. The person who aspires to the proclamation of the word must first discipline himself to hear it; and he who has found a way to listen to the word has discovered an indispensable ingredient in proclaiming it. In the context of Christian theology, the word of God is that word which is both heard and spoken. Faith is an accoustical affair.

In the research and writing of the dissertation, I have been impressed by the similarities between modern communication theory and the dynamics of the biblical witness. Communication theorists speak of communication in terms of eliciting a response from a per-

son or group of persons. The communication source intends for the receiver to respond to his message in appropriate ways. The pattern which is operative in this model is that of receiving and acting.

The form of witness revealed in the Bible is clearly that of testimony. "...these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name." (John 20:31) We need to see the New Testament in the context of the preaching of the early church. These words broke forth into the church's vocabulary not merely to inform, but to convince and awaken faith in the hearers. As the Christian message was proclaimed, it had evocative power. People were called to listen to this message and follow Christ. The emphasis was on hearing and obeying. Preaching had as its purpose the proclamation of Christ with whom persons had to deal. People were called to make a decision of faith, to respond in obedience to God's love revealed in Christ. It is this element of bindingness that needs to be recovered in the church's worship. The level of our anticipation needs to be raised. Too often, the worship of the church, including the preaching of the word, settles into dull and familiar routine, and nothing really happens because nothing is expected. There are no surprises of joy, no sharp words that penetrate the hardness of our hearts, and few assurances that our fractured lives have been healed and that new life awaits us. We depart from the service without imperatives for

mission. Effective preaching evokes a response, calls for a verdict and confronts us with the decision of faith.

Communication theory asserts that participation and involvement are keys to effective communication. People hear as they are involved, as they participate in the creation of a message. The concept of participation fits appropriately into the biblical context. The central affirmation of the Christian gospel is the Incarnation, the truth that God has identified with His people. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." (John 1:14) When the early Christian community wanted to celebrate the uniqueness of Christ, they did so in imaginative words like this:

Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2: 5-8)

There is that obedience of God as He enters the human arena, feeling all the anguish and alienation of the human situation. He participated in human existence, and the words he uttered flowed out of his role as a servant. His message had communicative power because it gathered up the human predicament and looked at it in the light of God's searching love.

Effective proclamation of the gospel will cross the threshold of people's lives and draw them into the preaching process. Persons

really hear the good news as they bring their own needs and aspirations and allow their experiences to become the stuff out of which preaching is made. Communication is a matter of participation. Ministers who neglect this principle may go through all the motions of preaching, their sentences carefully constructed and their homiletical material reflecting theological preciseness; but all they can expect from their preaching is that it will skirt the periphery of persons' real hungers and hopes. Involvement is the key to the hearing of the gospel. In preaching, the minister brings the meanings which persons in the congregation bring from their lives. Illumination and life-changing communication takes place in this encounter of meanings. The preacher must develop a style which encourages the congregation to bring their experiences into interaction with the ideas and experiences which are reflected in the sermon. For the hearing of the word to be a reality, there needs to be a reciprocity of meanings between the person who is preaching and the listening congregation.

The insight that communication involves a flow of meanings between persons has tremendous implications for the preacher and his relationship to the congregation. The first essential is that the minister serve in the midst of the congregation as a person. He is not likely to be heard as a preacher unless he is first known as a human being, unless his ministry is characterized by openness and

vulnerability. This means that the preacher is called on to locate himself at those interfaces of life where his people live out their days, where they confront the human prospect with all its misery and grandeur. He must experience the other side, let the failures and frustrations of his congregation touch his own humanity, go into their valley of despair, shoulder their burdens, share their risks and celebrate their joys. It is out of this kind of sharing and involvement that the word of God is heard. Proclamation takes on a dimension of excitement and relevance when the preacher and congregation participate in each other's existence.

It is this element of participation that brings concreteness to preaching. The preacher cannot drift into vague generalities or deal with irrelevant pleasantries when he is involved in the needs of a particular people--merchants and farmers, busy husbands and harried housewives, youth with their frivolities and frustrations, the elderly with their declining zeal and sometimes weakening spirit, the poor who feel bereft and cut off from the world's resources, and the rich whose affluence has failed to satisfy the emptiness at the center of their lives. It is participation in this concrete human community that offers the possibility of preaching becoming a vehicle of God's renewing spirit.

In the light of the biblical revelation, it becomes easier to grasp the meaning of communication as sharing in commonly under-

stood relationships. When the early Christians picked a word to describe their life together, they chose the word "koinonia." This word gathers up the sense of mutual concern, sharing, togetherness and participation which characterized the Christian community. Christians were bound together through reciprocal giving and receiving. Furthermore, they saw their life together as being supported and sustained through participation in that spirit which was in Christ Jesus. The concept of the church as a mutually nurturing community has striking consequences for Christian preaching. The proclamation of the gospel is not the prerogative of the ordained clergyman, but is a task in which every Christian participates. The sermon is given to the whole church and the whole church is called to share the burden of preaching. The recovery of this communal aspect of preaching will lead toward revitalized worship. It will make real that definition of the church as the place where the word of God is heard. We are brought back to Paul's affirmation: "So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ." (Romans 10:17)

Hearing and preaching, preaching and hearing--the two are indissolubly bound together. As the gospel is preached and heard, it prompts the response of faith and commitment. Preaching becomes part of God's saving activity. Preaching is not a moral lesson, or theological lecture or comments on the contemporary scene; it is nothing less than the event through which God reveals Himself,

awakening in us a sensitivity to His judgment and grace, calling us to repentance and obedience, and offering us strength for the way.

Preaching has a sacramental quality. Through the preaching of the gospel we reach out with sensitive caring for each other and we offer ourselves in devotion to God. This is why it is appropriate to affirm that the church is where the word is both preached and heard.

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